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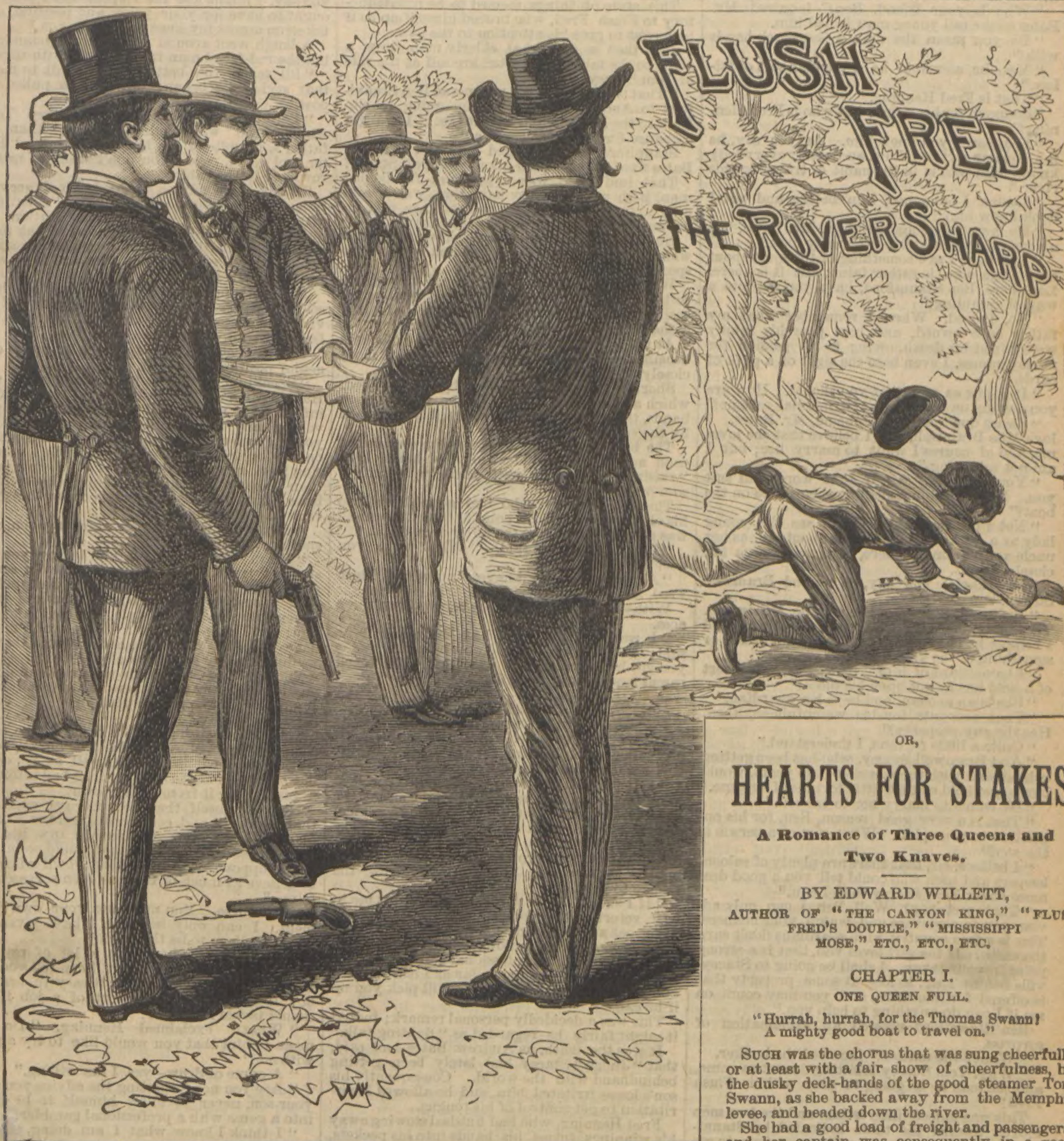
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OR,
HEARTS FOR STAKES.

A Romance of Three Queens and
Two Knaves.

BY EDWARD WILLETT,
AUTHOR OF "THE CANYON KING," "FLUSH
FRED'S DOUBLE," "MISSISSIPPI
MOSE," ETC., ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.
ONE QUEEN FULL.

"Hurrah, hurrah, for the Thomas Swann!
A mighty good boat to travel on."

SUCH was the chorus that was sung cheerfully or at least with a fair show of cheerfulness, by the dusky deck-hands of the good steamer Tom Swann, as she backed away from the Memphis levee, and headed down the river.

She had a good load of freight and passengers, and her captain was consequently in a good humor, and all on board appeared to be in a good humor, as they were well fed and cared

"I AM AFRAID THAT MAJOR STACEY HAS BEEN TAKEN ILL," FLUSH FRED REMARKED
SARCASTICALLY, AS HE LOWERED HIS REVOLVER AND STEPPED BACK.

for, and were making a quick and pleasant trip.

The last passenger who came aboard at Memphis, just before the gang-plank was hauled in, was a well-dressed and handsome young man, with bright dark eyes, and a pleasant but determined face.

His face was smilingly pleasant when he entered the cabin, where he seemed to have plenty of friends, as he was at once greeted with various degrees of warmth and familiarity.

Among those who greeted him and took him by the hand was a noticeable young man.

Not noticeable because of his dress, which was by no means costly or stylish, though neat enough, but because of his person, as he was tall, with the figure of an athlete, and the grace of a young Apollo.

These points caused him to be noticed by the men, and gazed at by the women, wherever he went.

When he had shaken hands with the new passenger, speaking to him in a friendly tone, he crossed the cabin to a man standing there, who had been looking at him as if watching him.

This man was a person of some importance on the Tom Swann, as well as elsewhere.

He was Andrew Bates, well known as a banker and speculator, and reputed to be one of the wealthiest men in Memphis.

In person he was short and rather stout, with a comfortable, well-fed appearance, smooth face, inclined to be bald, small but keen eyes, and the general look of a man who has made his way in the world and is able to hold what he has got.

"Who is your friend, Ben?" inquired Mr. Bates as the tall young man joined him.

"Do you mean the man I just shook hands with?"

"Yes—he seems to be a popular sort of fellow."

"That is Fred Henning."

"So much for his name; but who is Fred Henning?"

"I supposed you knew him. As you say, he is a popular sort of fellow, and nearly everybody knows him who is in the habit of traveling this river."

"I think I have met him before, and yet I don't know him."

"He is a professional gambler, Mr. Bates, but a very intelligent and gentlemanly man."

"I thought I saw something of the sport about him. The sign is rather faint; but it is there. Look here, Ben Stanniford, have you got into a way of gambling?"

"No, indeed. When I remember what my father once owned, and how poor his family were left at his death, owing to his passion for money games, I even hate the sight of a pack of cards."

"It is just as well that you should. How are you getting on with your matrimonial scheme?"

"Please don't call it a scheme, Mr. Bates. I love Miss Bramwell, and I believe that she loves me, and of course I want to marry her; but I am not scheming."

"Your venture, then, if that word will suit you. How are things shaping themselves on the boat?"

"Not a bit favorably. I can see the young lady at a distance; but that is about all, as her uncle and cousin are here, and they watch her closely."

"Her uncle, you say, is named Bramwell Stacey."

"Bramwell Stacey, of Staceyville, Mississippi. They call him Judge Stacey down that way, and I believe he has been a justice of the peace or something of the kind."

"I have heard of him. Now, Ben, what sort of a hold has he got upon his niece?"

"She is an orphan, and he is her guardian."

"That accounts for his watchfulness, then. Has she any property?"

"Quite a little fortune, I understand."

"And Bramwell Stacey, who has been getting behindhand with the world of late years, would like to get hold of that little fortune, I suppose."

"He wants to marry her to his son."

"That is a very good reason, Ben, for his opposition to your plan. What sort of a person is the son?"

"I believe, sir, that there are plenty of saloon-keepers and such who could tell you a good deal more about Tom Stacey than I can."

"That sort, hey? Well, Ben, I can only advise you to persevere and watch your chances. This is a free country, and guardians don't earn the earth. If the girl loves you, that is a strong point in your favor. I shall be going to Staceyville before long, to look at some property that is offered for sale there, and you may count on me if I can do anything to help you."

Ben Stanniford uttered an exclamation of surprise.

"What's the matter?" inquired the banker.

"Why, Tom Stacey is sitting down to a game, and the man he is going to play with is Flush Fred!"

This was indeed interesting, and the two men moved toward the table indicated by Stanniford, not only because they were curious to see the game, but because Andrew Bates wanted to take a look at Tom Stacey.

Tom Stacey was indeed "that sort," as the

banker had remarked—when Ben Stanniford spoke of the knowledge that saloon-keepers were supposed to have of him.

He was a young man a few years beyond his majority, well-dressed, and might have been considered passably good-looking, but for the unmistakable evidence of dissipation which his face showed, together with the air of recklessness that in some men accompanies dissipation.

Opposite him was seated Fred Henning, his usual pleasant but determined look being replaced just then by an expression of indifference, as if he did not care about the game or the man he was to play with.

The game was to be the familiar and favorite "draw," and they had just cut for the deal, when Andrew Bates and Ben Stanniford approached the table.

"I suppose you know all about this game," observed Tom Stacey; "but I am no slouch of a poker player myself."

His style of playing showed that he was "no slouch," in spite of the fact that he had been drinking before he sat down, and kept calling for drinks as the game proceeded.

There was at first the usual varying luck with which the professional sometimes beguiles the unwary, or which may be seen when two experienced players are feeling of each other, preparatory to getting down to real work.

It was soon evident, however, that the young man from Mississippi was winning pretty steadily, though the "pots" were not large enough to enrich him rapidly.

This state of things seemed to be unsatisfactory to Flush Fred, who braced himself up as if he meant to give his attention to the game.

Just then a somewhat elderly man drew a chair to the table, and seated himself at the side of Tom Stacey.

"That is Tom's father," whispered Ben Stanniford to Andrew Bates. "I am going to slip back to the ladies' cabin now, to see if I can get a chance for a word with Eva."

Stanniford quietly edged off, and Andrew Bates fixed his attention upon "Judge" Stacey.

That individual was a tall and full-bodied man, with rather scanty hair that was beginning to turn gray, smooth and red face, and an expression of cunning mixed with sensuality.

He had the appearance of a well-to-do planter whose "niggers" might be supposed to have no special enjoyment of life.

When Fred Henning had braced himself up to business, his antagonist ceased winning so easily; but the stakes grew higher, and the game became decidedly more interesting.

At the same time the collection of onlookers became more numerous, and they crowded more closely about the table.

Shortly there came a deal by Flush Fred, which appeared to give both the players good hands, the value of which was sensibly increased by the subsequent draw.

The betting became lively, as the opponents, each apparently confident of his hand, kept "raising" each other until there was quite a sum on the table.

Then Tom Stacey, who had gone down into his clothes for his last coin to "see the raise," was compelled to bring the affair to a crisis.

"I call you," he said. "What have you got?"

"A queen full on knaves," answered Flush Fred, as he showed his hand.

With an oath young Stacey threw down three aces.

"I was sure that you had the queens," he said; "but I would like to know how in thunder you got hold of that jack of spades. The black rascal has cleaned me out."

CHAPTER II.

UNLIMITED POKER.

FRED HENNING quietly gathered in the spoils of victory, a proceeding that was delayed a little by some remarks made by the elder Stacey.

"I hope that this will be a lesson to you, my son," began the elder man in solemn tones. "I hope that you will hereafter heed my advice, and be careful what sort of people you play cards with."

Flush Fred's eyebrows were raised a trifle, but he said nothing as he slowly drew the money toward him.

"If I should be as careful as you want me to be," retorted the younger Stacey, "I would never get a sight at any kind of a game."

"But you need not allow yourself to be drawn into a game with a professional gambler. I can tell one of those scamps as far as I can see him, and you ought to know that he will pick you up if he can."

This was a decidedly personal remark; indeed it might fairly be regarded as "fighting talk."

It was the truth, as Andrew Bates had said, that "Judge" Stacey had lately been getting behindhand with the world. Consequently his son's losses irritated him, and he allowed his irritation to get control of his tongue.

Fred Henning, who had finished stowing away his winnings, thrust his hands into his pockets, leaned back in his chair, and stared at the red-faced man before him.

There was a coldness or hardness in his steady

stare which might have told those who knew him that he was inclined to be wicked.

"And who may you be, my friend, who are so free in giving your opinion?" he mildly inquired.

"I am, Judge Stacey, sir—Judge Bramwell Stacey, of Staceyville, Mississippi."

"Well, Judge Stacey, of Staceyville, you may or may not be a good judge of some matters; but there is one thing which I am sure you are not a judge of."

"What is that, sir?"

"You are no judge of the manners that are becoming to a gentleman."

"What do you mean by that?"

"My meaning ought to be plain. I say that the remark you have just made was uncalled for and ungentlemanly."

"Do you dare to say sir, that I am no gentleman, sir?"

"I am not well enough acquainted with you to give a positive opinion on that point; but, if I should have to judge by the specimen of your manners which you have just exhibited, I would surely say that you are not a gentleman."

"Take that back, sir!" roared the red-faced man as he jumped up. "Take it back, sir, or I'll thrash you!"

"Thrash me?" sneered Fred Henning. "Thrash me? Of course you don't know how absurd that talk is, or you would drop it. Permit me to inform you, Mr. Judge Stacey, of Staceyville, that I have never been thrashed since I was a boy at school, and I have quite outgrown that sort of thing. If you should try to do as you say, I might lose the respect that I possibly ought to have for your years and position, and take you across my knee and spank you."

A laugh went around among the bystanders; but the red-faced man turned white with rage.

"I'll teach you better than to talk to me in that style," he began; but his son pulled his coat.

"Better calm down, pap," remarked Tom, whose head was evidently cooler than his father's, in spite of his heavy drinking. "Better cool down, pap. You don't want to raise a row here in the cabin."

"Your son's advice is good, Mr. Stacey, of Staceyville," observed Flush Fred. "Your dignity, to say nothing of other considerations, requires that you should calm down, speak more reasonably, and be careful to make no statements which you are not sure are fully warranted by the facts."

The gentleman from Mississippi suffered himself to be persuaded by this combination of advice, and resumed the seat from which he had lately risen.

Tom Stacey got up, and took a more congenial position at the bar.

"Speaking of professional gamblers," said Henning in a confidential tone, "I would like to inform you mildly, if I can do so without provoking any unpleasant controversy, that the young gentleman who has just left us has played on me, or tried to play on me, while I was sitting here, more of the tricks of those gentry than I have seen in a long time. He seems to have learned what he knows from the worst class of professionals, too."

"Be careful what you say about my son, sir," sputtered Judge Stacey.

"I am careful, and I am telling you the straight truth. I sat down to play a square game with him for pastime; but he wouldn't have it, and he went crooked from the start. When I dropped on his style, I started in to beat him; but I must say, for my side, that I merely made his foul play of no account, and that my winning was by good luck alone."

Though these statements were made in a mild and conciliatory tone, there was something in Henning's tone or look that irritated Judge Stacey intensely.

There was nothing that he could fasten on as really objectionable, and he felt himself compelled to conceal his anger as well as he could; but his wrath kept rising until he had difficulty in preventing it from boiling over.

He told himself that he must get even with that impudent and cool-headed robber in some manner, and he thought that he saw his way clear to get an advantage that would count.

"I suppose," said he, "that you'll allow me to believe as much of that as seems reasonable to me."

"Of course. You must use your own judgment. I can only say that I have given you what I believe to be the truth."

"Well, sir, you have put a lot of my son's money into your pocket; but I can tell you that though you may have found it easy to beat the boy, it would be another sort of a job if you should tackle his father."

"What!" exclaimed Henning. "Do you mean to hint that you would like to try a game with me?"

"A game of draw—yes, I am willing."

"Are you not forgetting the advice you gave your son, never to allow himself to be drawn into a game with a professional gambler?"

"I think I know what I am doing, sir. Do you want to play, or are you talking up a chance to back out?"

"I am ready."

"We will have a fresh pack of cards, then."
A fresh pack was brought, and it was shuffled by both, and they cut for the deal.

"This is to be without limit," remarked Judge Stacey as he showed his cut.

Fred Henning did not wince; but he changed color in the slightest degree.

He perceived at once the purpose of his adversary, and the advantage that might be held over him.

There is no game so cruel and unfair as poker without limit, where the heaviest capital can "take the pot," and the young man could scarcely doubt that his adversary carried more financial gems than he did; but he was not inclined to back out in the presence of those interested spectators.

If Judge Stacey's purpose should be what he suspected it to be, he need not risk much.

As the first deal was made, Tom Stacey came back from the bar, and he opened his eyes wide when he saw his father sitting down to play with his late antagonist.

Again there was the usual varying luck to begin with, and Flush Fred soon perceived that the elder Stacey easily surpassed his son in the knowledge of "ways that are dark."

Of course it then became necessary for the professional to bring his "science" into action, and to let his adversary know that he could not win by that style of foul play.

Still Judge Stacey, perhaps seeking some other advantage, or because the stakes were not yet sufficiently high to tempt him, did not seek to work the limit, and Henning saw fit to force him to show his colors.

So he dealt himself an invincible hand, his favorite royal flush, and began to make lively betting on it.

Judge Stacey met him in an equally lively spirit, and kept "going better" until the pot was worth having.

Then he drew from his pocket a roll of bills, counted out two thousand dollars, and laid it on the table.

"I see your fifty," said he, "and go you two thousand dollars better."

"You oversize my pile," remarked Henning.

"Can't help it. This game is without limit. I will give you half an hour to raise the money."

That settled Fred Henning, as most of his available capital was on the board, and he knew of nobody on the Tom Swann who would be both willing and able to lend him so large a sum as two thousand dollars.

Just then a fat-looking pocketbook fell on the table in front of him.

Judge Stacey saw it fall, but could not for the life of him have told who had dropped it there.

In surprise he looked around at the bystanders, but saw nothing in their countenances to direct his suspicion toward any person in particular.

Doubtless more than one of them had seen the act; but they were not disposed to spoil sport by telling what they knew.

Flush Fred did not know where the pocketbook had come from, and did not even look over his shoulder to see who might have dropped it.

This was not the first time he had been "startled" in a somewhat similar style, and it was reasonable to suppose that somebody who had confidence in him or in his hand wished to help him out of his difficulty.

Therefore he picked up the pocketbook quite as a matter of course, and opened it, perceiving at once that he had been trusted with a large amount of money.

In big bills he counted out the sum of five thousand dollars, and laid it before him.

"I see your two thousand dollars," said he, "and go you three thousand dollars better. I will give you an hour to raise the money."

Bramwell Stacey's red face turned white with rage again, as he perceived that it would be impossible for him to play the game which he had considered a sure thing, and upon which he had already raised so much.

All that he had risked must be a dead loss, and he must also be subjected to the mortification of being foiled in his attempt to take a mean advantage of his adversary.

"Curse that pocketbook and the man who put it there!" he muttered as he rose sadly from the table, after casting a last lingering look at the valuable "pot."

"You had better heed my advice, pap," said his son, who had stood behind him when the disaster occurred. "Never allow yourself to be drawn into a game by a professional gambler."

Judge Stacey answered not a word, but hurried away from the scene of his misfortune.

CHAPTER III.

ANOTHER QUEEN FULL.

FLUSH FRED, without any show of joy or triumph, gathered up his winnings, and put them in his pocket.

He then returned to the place from which he had taken them the five thousand dollars in big bills, and got up to look for the owner of the pocketbook.

There was no need of asking anybody who it was that had done him that favor, as he was sure that his unknown friend would disclose himself at the proper time, and nobody volunteered any information, as it was apparent that he meant to do the fair thing and knew what he was about.

"Mind your own business," is a rule that is, or was at that time, well established and maintained on Western steamboats, notwithstanding the easy companionship of strangers and the intimacies that arose between chance acquaintances.

Democratic as the passengers were in their manners, they were, seldom intrusive.

Andrew Bates had withdrawn from his position near the table when the game terminated, and he stepped forward to meet Fred Henning when the latter was clear of the crowd of bystanders.

"I was glad to see you beat that Mississippi man's mean game," said he.

"I was glad to beat it, too; but I would never have done so if it hadn't been for unexpected assistance."

"Well, I knew that your hand was good for any amount of money, and I could not bear to see it bluffed off in that style."

"It was you, then, who dropped the pocketbook before me?"

"Yes. Allow me to introduce myself—Andrew Bates, of Memphis."

"I have heard of you, sir, and am glad to know you. Here is your pocketbook, just as you gave it to me. That was a great favor, Mr. Bates, coming from a gentleman with whom I was unacquainted."

"But I knew you by reputation, and my young friend, Ben Stanniford, had just been speaking to me about you. I ran no risk, as I was sure that your hand was good, and that my money was safe with you."

"A fine fellow is Ben. Where is he now?"

"He went aft a little while ago, to speak to a lady there. Here he comes, looking as proud as a peacock."

Ben Stanniford had made his way swiftly to the ladies' cabin, unperceived by Bramwell Stacey and his son, who were deeply absorbed in the latter's game with Fred Henning.

The ladies' cabin was separated by a merely imaginary line from the rest of the cabin, though distinctly a separate place in its general appearance, and as the young man approached it he saw there a face and a form that he knew.

The face and form moved toward a door that led out upon the after guard, and the young woman gave a backward glance down the cabin as she disappeared.

Stanniford interpreted the glance to mean that he was expected to follow, and directly he was greeted by the young lady, the very person whom he had come there to seek.

Eva Bramwell was a handsome blonde of nineteen, tall for her age, lithe and graceful, with bright eyes and lively manners.

It was easy to judge by her look and tone that she was not indifferent to the young man who had followed her out there.

She had stopped near the door by which she made her exit, and from that position it was easy to look through and see what was going on at the other end of the cabin.

"I am glad to see you here, Ben," she said. "How did you get the chance?"

"Your unrespected uncle had sat down to watch his unpromising son as he played a game of cards at which he is sure to be beat, and I took advantage of their occupation to slip off and say a word to you."

"That is safe enough, I suppose. You may stand there, Ben, and I will keep an eye on them, in case either of them should start to come back here. Not that I am afraid, you know; but it would not be good policy for us to be seen together on this boat—that is, by them. It is our business just now to lull their suspicions if we can."

"If we can; but I don't believe we can."

"We can keep on the safe side, anyhow. Have you any news for me, Ben?"

"Nothing worth speaking of. I have come here to get some news from you—to ask you how the Stacey scheme appears to work."

"I suppose they think it is working very well, and that they have nothing to fear as long as you and I can be kept apart; but they will not be likely to push matters until they have me safe at Staceyville. Do you think you can go there, Ben?"

"You may be sure that I will."

"But not with us. That would never do."

"Not with you; but I will not be far behind you."

The two young people continued to talk, their converse being such as lovers use, until they were joined by another lady who came out from the cabin.

She might still be considered a young lady, though she was several years older than Eva Bramwell, from whom she differed widely in personal appearance, being a decided brunette, short, and inclined to stoutness.

Her dress was rich—too rich for a traveling costume—and she would not have been ill-look-

ing, though by no means a beauty, but for a cast in her left eye that was a real disfigurement.

She was evidently well acquainted with Ben Stanniford and Eva Bramwell, and her presence did not seem to embarrass them.

"Stolen waters are sweet, and bread eaten in secret is pleasant," she observed, smilingly. "I hope you are enjoying the banquet, my dears."

"We are not grumbling," answered Eva, "except that we have to look out for the enemy."

"I don't know but that ought to give more zest to the entertainment. By the way, speaking of the enemy, I came out here to ask you, Mr. Stanniford, who that gentleman is with whom the younger enemy appears to be playing cards."

"That gentleman, Miss Marks, is named Fred Henning."

"I thought so. I am a little near-sighted, you know; but I was almost sure that I recognized him. Are you acquainted with him?"

"He is a friend of mine."

"I wish you would say to him, with my compliments, that Betty Marks is here, and that he may have the honor of an interview with her."

"With pleasure, Miss Marks, and I am glad to learn that you are a friend of his."

"He and I understand each other well, I can assure you."

Miss Betty Marks went back into the cabin, and the lovers continued their conversation until Bramwell Stacey and his son started toward that end of the boat.

Then Ben Stanniford went around at the stern, entered the cabin at the other side, and went to the forward part to meet his friends.

"Mr. Henning was just asking about you, Ben," said Andrew Bates. "He has had a game with each of the Staceys, and you ought to have been here to see the sport."

"I have had employment that pleased me better," answered Ben.

"No doubt you have; but this was worth seeing."

"It must be worth telling about, then, and you ought to give me the particulars."

Andrew Bates described the two contents quite graphically for the benefit of his young friend, who was much amused by the details, as well as glad to learn that Fred Henning had triumphed so signally.

"By the way, Fred," said he, "there is a young lady on board who knows you, and who told me to tell you, with her compliments, that she would like to see you."

"Who is she?"

"Miss Betty Marks, and I am glad that she is a friend of yours. She is wealthy, I am told."

"She is as good as gold and as true as steel, too. Her only fault is that she carries her left eye in her right vest pocket. I shall be very glad to meet Miss Betty Marks, Ben."

After a little while Fred Henning spruced himself up a bit, and went back to the ladies' cabin, where he found Miss Marks waiting for him, and she did not attempt to disguise her delight at meeting him.

It was evident that, as Betty Marks had said to Ben Stanniford, she and Fred Henning understood each other very well; but it was equally certain that they were not lovers.

After a brief talk in the cabin, they went out on the guards, where they were shortly joined by two other ladies.

One of them was Eva Bramwell, and Betty Marks mentioned the name of the other as Miss Martha Gibbs.

Miss Gibbs was considerably older than either of the others, having passed her thirtieth year—it might be ungallant to say how long since.

However, she was not unwilling to state her age, and it did not worry her if she was alluded to as an old maid.

She was neither a blonde nor a brunette, but a mixture of the two styles, having light hair with dark brown eyes, and her face, though plain, could not be called ugly, as it showed plenty of intelligence, and usually wore a bright and wide-awake expression.

Betty Marks introduced Fred Henning to those two, and had something particular to say about them.

"Now, Mr. Henning," she said, "I want you to listen to me attentively. You see us three."

"I do," answered Fred, "and am grateful for the sight. The three—"

"Graces, hey? You can't work that off on us, my friend. We are not fishing for compliments, and I am trying to talk business. You see us three? Well, sir, we three are going to Staceyville."

"Not as guests of the Staceys, I hope," suggested Fred.

"Only one of us. Miss Bramwell will be an inmate of the Stacey mansion, because Judge Stacey is her uncle and guardian. I have property there, and will live in my own house. Miss Gibbs is going to teach school there, and she will live with me."

"But you will all be with the Staceys or live near the Staceys. Three queens and two knaves—that makes a good full hand, and I think it ought to played for all it is worth."

CHAPTER IV.

FLUSH FRED'S PARTNER.

"You should reserve your card-table slang, Mr. Henning, for those who understand it better than we do," observed Betty Marks. "You are right, though, in saying that we will be more or less mixed up with the Staceys, and now I will tell you the object of this interview. If ever thou didst thy dear partner love, I want you to go to Staceyville."

"For any particular purpose?"

"For a very particular purpose. This young lady, Miss Bramwell, is something of an heiress, and her uncle means to marry her to his son. As you have seen Tom Stacey, I need not tell you what he is."

"He can't marry her to anybody against her will," suggested Henning.

"But he has authority over her, and will be likely to worry her severely. As for Judge Stacey himself, I believe he has made up his mind to marry me. Of course it is my money that he is after, like all the rest of them whom I have sent away disgusted; but the Jew blood in me rises up and protests against the Stacey style."

"You don't have to marry him, Miss Marks."

"I know that; but the pestering power of the man is almost beyond belief, and I don't want him to worry me."

"Nobody seems to have made up his mind to marry me, fortunately," remarked Miss Gibbs.

"You may get in the tangle, though. There's plenty more Staceys, and you may be a victim yet. Now, Fred Henning, I want to know if you will go to Staceyville."

"Of course I will, at your request. Shall I go with you?"

"Not exactly, but you may follow us, shortly. I shall expect you to show up there pretty soon, and you may consider yourself in my employ, as my general manager and confidential agent. There, now, that is settled, and you may run along to bed like a good boy. I suppose we will reach our landing in the morning, and we will see you then."

The three ladies said and smiled a good-night, and sought their respective state-rooms.

Fred Henning was in no hurry to go to bed, but preferred to seek his friend Stanniford and tell him of this new turn of affairs.

On his route thither he was waylaid by Tom Stacey, who pounced upon him unexpectedly.

Tom was reasonably sober, for him, but seemed to have worked himself up to a high pitch of indignation.

"I say, you Henning," he broke out, "I heard that talk just now between you and those women folks."

"Really?" replied Fred, with a bit of a sneer. "I would have thought that you had bad habits enough, without taking up the vice of eaves-dropping."

"I just happened to overhear it, I tell you."

"Like the man who carried off a halter, and there happened to be a horse at the end of it. Well, Mr. Stacey, what if you did hear it?"

"Just this. You had better drop that scheme right away, and never think of it again."

"Why so?"

"It ain't safe."

"For me, do you mean?"

"It won't be safe for you."

"That don't worry me a bit, Mr. Tom Stacey. I never stop to think whether a thing I am going to do is safe for me or not. Indeed, if it isn't safe, I like it all the better. That's the kind of a durned fool I am."

"You can talk big, I know, whether you mean it or not; but you had better take my advice, and keep away from Staceyville for you can only get into trouble there."

"As how?"

"More ways than one. You may be a good hand at cards and some other things, but you won't stand the least bit of a show among us Staceys there, at Staceyville. We own all the country about there, and all the people, too."

"White and black?"

"Pretty much everybody."

"Very well, Mr. Tom Stacey, when I call around there I will make you an offer for some of the land—not for any of the people, as I would never give a straw for white folks who would let you own them."

"You had better keep away from there, I tell you."

"I am much obliged to you, Mr. Tom Stacey, for your friendly advice and warning. It adds greatly to my anticipated pleasure. I shall surely go to Staceyville, and will be rejoiced if you can make things lively for me there. The livelier the better. Good-evening, and don't forget, whatever game you play, that I expect to hold a 'queen full, on knaves.'"

Tom Stacey's warning, or threat, mattered nothing to Flush Fred as he sauntered down the cabin.

Indeed, he scarcely gave it a second thought.

His thoughts just then were occupied with Betty Marks, who, though she was not handsome, was wealthy, and in other respects was worth thinking about.

He had made her acquaintance through a service he had, by chance, been able to render her,

and from that acquaintance had sprung a friendship that was almost an intimacy, Miss Marks appearing to take pride in speaking of him as her "partner."

If Fred Henning had needed to be "staked," as sometimes happens to the best of men in his peculiar branch of industry, he knew that Miss Marks would be willing to lend him freely.

If he had been a vain man, he would have thought that he might marry Miss Marks and her money for the asking; but he was not vain, and it may be said of him that he did not care a straw for her money.

As he would have expressed it, that was the sort of a durned fool he was.

She was rich, she was independent, and she was fond of Flush Fred—those three points were sure.

He was walking along in a brown study when he ran against Ben Stanniford, who made no effort to get out of his way.

"What's the matter with you, Fred?" demanded that young gentleman. "Are you sleeping on your feet?"

"Hello, Ben! I was looking for you."

"You were not looking very sharply, I should say, as you nearly ran over me without seeing me. It is my opinion that you had better go to bed."

"I will do so directly. There is just one thing I want to say to you. Ben, you are going to have a partner in your Staceyville scheme."

"What sort of a partner?"

"A pretty good one, I think. I am the man."

"You, Fred? I could never ask a better one. But what do you mean?"

"You told me that Miss Marks, who happens to be a special friend of mine, wanted to see me, and I have met her. She lives at Staceyville, and she says that I must go there shortly. So I am going with you, my boy."

"That is glorious news for me. How did it happen?"

"Just as I have told you. That is all there is about it. We are to be partners, Ben, and after a while we will consider when and how we will go to Staceyville. Just now we had better go to bed, as we must be up early in the morning. We may reach the Staceyville landing before the sun is three hours high, and we will want to be on hand to say good-by to our fair friends."

Fred Henning and Ben Stanniford were up at a reasonably early hour; but it was not until an hour or so after breakfast that the Tom Swann rounded to at the landing which was called the Staceyville Landing, though the town which it represented—a village, as it would be styled at the North—was situated some three miles back from the river.

Two open carriages were waiting there, and the baggage of the Staceyville party was speedily loaded upon them, while Bramwell Stacey descended the stairs that led from the cabin deck to the boiler deck, followed by Eva Bramwell, Betty Marks and Martha Gibbs, Tom Stacey bringing up the rear.

The young man halted at the top of the stairs, to say a parting word to Fred Henning, who stood there with Ben Stanniford, watching the exodus of the party.

"You had better take my advice," said he. "The day you show your face in Staceyville will be the sorriest day you ever saw."

"Thank you," pleasantly answered Fred. "It is so long since I have seen a sorry day, that I want to know what one looks like. I will be sure to come, my friend."

"Curse you for an obstinate fool!" roared Tom, and he shook his fist to emphasize his speech.

As he did so he missed his footing, and would have fallen to the bottom of the steep stairs, if Fred Henning had not grabbed him by the coat collar and held him up.

"You had nearly gone over," said Fred. "You should be careful not to get excited when you are standing in slippery places. There, you are on your feet now. Ta-ta, Tommy!"

Tom Stacey stumbled down the stairs without having the grace to utter a word of thanks to the man who had saved his limbs, if not his life.

Betty Marks got into her carriage with Martha Gibbs, and Eva Bramwell entered the other carriage with the Staceys.

As they drove away, Judge Stacey and his son were annoyed by the sight of Fred Henning and Ben Stanniford, who were waving their handkerchiefs toward the carriages, while Betty Marks and Eva Bramwell were smiling and waving back to them.

"Those Staceys seem to be afraid of me, Ben," remarked Henning, as the boat backed away from the shore; "but I had supposed that you were the only one they had reason to fear."

CHAPTER V.

IN THE ENEMY'S CAMP.

STACEYVILLE was called a town by its inhabitants; but it was only a village, and a small one at that.

There was a dried-up, gone-to-sleep look about it, as if prosperity and progress had passed it by and forgotten it; but the people who lived there

were firmly of the opinion that it was one of the brightest and best bits of the habitable universe and that they were, themselves, the finest specimens of humanity extant.

It anybody had informed them of the fact that they were ignorant and far behind the age, he would only have been despised for his pains.

Staceyville had been named by and for old Zack Stacey, Bramwell Stacey's father, who had been a tough and strenuous citizen in his day, shrewd at a bargain, overbearing in his ways, and with a masterful grasp for getting and holding the dollar.

The dollar had been gradually slipping from the fingers of Bramwell Stacey, and the prospect was that his son Tom would get rid of it altogether.

Therefore, it was natural that "the judge," as he was generally called, should look about him for some means of mending the fortunes of the family, and it would be quite the proper thing, he thought, to annex the property and person of his orphan niece and ward, Eva Bramwell.

It was for that purpose that he had taken her from the school which she was still attending in Kentucky, and had brought her to Staceyville, where she could be under his eye and control.

It was only lately that he had learned of the entangling attachment between Eva and Ben Stanniford, and it was only lately that Eva had gained the acquaintance and advice of Betty Marks.

The first fact worried Judge Stacey not a little, as he perceived that Stanniford was an enterprising and persistent young man, who would be likely to make trouble; but he was not aware of any danger that might arise from the second fact.

The Stacey homestead, which was situated a little way outside of the village, was a large and rambling old structure, which had been added to and built upon until it might be termed a conglomeration; yet it was roomy and airy and comfortable.

Attached to it was a large but diminishing and incumbered plantation, which had been worked for all it was worth for many years.

"So, too, had the hands who worked it, as Judge Stacey justly bore the reputation of being a hard man with his "niggers."

Miss Betty Marks's house, which was further from the village than the Stacey mansion, was somewhat smaller and newer and neater.

The plantation attached to it had a more prosperous appearance than the other, and the field hands and house hands doubtless had a better enjoyment of life than those on the Stacey place.

There was a tavern at Staceyville, which was dignified by the name of hotel.

Though the accommodations were passably poor, the table could not fail to please anybody who admired Southern home cookery, and it might have been said for the proprietor that he ran the hotel as if it was his business to do the best he could for his occasional guests, instead of giving them as little as possible for their money.

"The Staceyville Hotel" was the pretentious name of this hostelry; but it was known as "Charley Taintor's" by many drummers and other travelers, who were sure to take it in on their rounds, and who gave Staceyville more of their time than was reasonable, considering the fact that they always spoke of it as a dead town.

Thither came Fred Henning and Ben Stanniford, brought over from the landing in a two-seated wagon, which also carried their small amount of baggage.

They were welcomed and made much of by the proprietor, who at once took a strong fancy to Flush Fred, and nothing the house contained was considered too good for them.

Dead as Staceyville was, in a business way, it was lively enough in some other respects, especially as regarded gossip, and the arrival of these two strangers, with all the information that could be procured concerning their names and intentions, was speedily made known to every person in the village and near it.

After a little rest and refreshment, they procured a buggy, and drove out to Betty Marks's place, and this piece of news was immediately put in circulation by the gossips.

The news of their arrival, in fact, had preceded them, and when they reached the Marks Plantation they found Miss Betty, backed by Martha Gibbs, ready to receive them and treat them hospitably.

"I would ask you both to hang up your hats in the hall and make your home with me," she said; "but Martha and I are two lone women, and the proprieties of life must be rigidly observed in these parts."

It is a fact that nowhere in this country is social intercourse more strictly guarded and more carefully conducted than among the best people of the South.

"Of course we would be glad to be with you," answered Henning; "but I believe that we will have nothing to complain of at the hotel, and perhaps that location will be best suited to any little game we may have to play here."

"Yes, I am told that Charley Taintor can keep a hotel if he wants to. But this house must

be the headquarters of the campaign, as the enemy is more or less in possession of all the other points."

"I am glad to see that Miss Gibbs is with you," observed Stanniford. "Where is the school that she is to teach?"

"That will not open for two months yet, and in the mean time she is my guest."

"Has any Stacey come forward, as you predicted, to force an unwelcome marriage upon her?"

"Not yet, but there is time enough for that, and Staceys are so plentiful that one of them is sure to strike at her before long."

"Are there so many Staceys?" inquired Fred.

"Their other name is Legion. You could never pitch a stone into a crowd anywhere about here without hitting a Stacey. Most of those who are not Staceys by name are related to the Staceys in one way or another."

"Is the hotel-keeper a Stacey?"

"Not he. Charley Taintor is nobody but himself; but he has to keep on the right side of the Staceys, I suppose, or they would make Staceyville unpleasant for him."

"How does Miss Bramwell seem to be getting on with the Stacey tribe?"

"That is more than I can tell you. I wish I knew, but I have tried in vain to find out. They keep her shut up, and I suppose they are bringing a pressure to bear on her in favor of Tom."

"What we have to do, then, is to find some way of persuading them to let up on the pressure."

"That is what we want to do; but I don't know how we are going to set about it."

Fred Henning and Ben Stanniford spent a pleasant afternoon with Betty Marks and her friend, though the younger man was quite uneasy because he could get no exact intelligence of Eva Bramwell, and it was after dark when they got back to the hotel at Staceyville.

Wishing to look about them and gain some knowledge of the village folks, they went into the bar-room and called for drinks.

The room was fuller than they had yet seen it; but the men who were gathered there were not patronizing the bar extensively, nor did they seem to be enjoying themselves in any way.

They had been conversing quite freely among themselves until Fred and Ben entered, when their conversation suddenly ceased, and all appeared to devote themselves to a silent but inquisitive examination of the strangers.

"Some of the Staceys who have come to take us in and size us up," whispered Henning to his friend.

One in particular kept his eyes fastened on them in a style that passed the limit of curiosity, and became impertinence.

He was a middle-aged man, short and inclined to be stout, with a fierce mustache under a fiery red nose, and a generally warlike look; but his dress was inclined to be seedy, and it was evidently some time since his buttoned-up coat had been new.

This man was doubtless a person of some importance in the village, as the others followed him with their eyes while he stared at the strangers, and all had the air of men who were silently expectant of something that had been prepared for in advance of its occurrence.

This condition of affairs was evident to the sharp intelligence of Flush Fred, and he determined to bring the affair, whatever it might be, to a crisis, being more than curious to know what these people meant.

His idea was that he would make the acquaintance of the person with a warlike look, and the natural and easy way to do that would be to invite him to drink.

Would he come to the bar in response to a polite invitation?

If he should follow his nose, Henning thought, he surely would.

Flush Fred invited Ben Stanniford to the bar again, and looked around.

As he did so, his glance lighted, as if casually, on the person of warlike appearance, who happened to stand near him.

"Will you take a drink with us?" he inquired, with one of his best smiles.

Even one who was not accustomed to that sort of thing would have known from the man's countenance that he was eager to accept such an invitation.

But he had a part to play, and could not accept it from that source.

"No, sah," he fiercely answered, drawing himself up as if he thought he could add a cubit to his stature.

"No, sah. You are mistaken in the man, sah. A gentleman, sah, never drinks with a gambler and a thief."

This, then, was what was the matter—a deliberate insult, provoked only by a bit of common politeness, and its intention was plain.

This was the beginning of the game, and what was the end meant to be?

The insulter was doubtless a Stacey, and probably nearly every man in the room was a Stacey, and they had come together there for that very purpose.

The intention was manifest, and it was to be supposed that the insulter's friends were there

to back him up; but Flush Fred gave no thought to these circumstances.

He only heard the insult, and saw the man who gave it.

As quick as a flash his left arm flew out, and, with a blow straight from the shoulder, he knocked the warlike person down.

CHAPTER VI.

DEADLY INTENTIONS.

FRED HENNING and his friend stood on their guard at once, as they expected an immediate rush of the partisans of the man who had been struck down.

They backed up against the bar, ready to draw their revolvers and make the best fight they could; but their expectations were agreeably disappointed.

No rush was made, and the bystanders kept their places as if the affair did not interest them.

The man on the floor slowly got up, flicked the dust from his clothes with a red pocket-handkerchief, deliberately extracted a card from his vest pocket, and drew himself up stiffly as he offered it to Henning.

The fact that his face plainly showed the mark of the blow he had received detracted somewhat from the dignity of this proceeding.

"Here is my card, sah," he said. "You will hear from me in the morning, sah."

Then he walked out of the bar-room, followed by most of the men who had witnessed the transaction.

Flush Fred, more amused than excited, looked at the card.

It bore the name of "Major Andrew Jackson Stacey," written with ink in a stiff and formal hand, and the inference was that it had been prepared specially for that occasion.

"Do you know that man?" inquired Fred, turning to the barkeeper.

"Yes, sir. That is Major Stacey, a gentleman of the old style, sir."

"I don't seem to understand his style."

"Major Stacey means business," observed a bystander.

"Queer sort of business. I call you to witness, gentlemen, that he insulted me grossly, and of course he deserved what he got. I knocked him down, and he settles the matter by handing me this piece of pasteboard."

"That don't settle it," put in the last speaker. "The major means business, and you will hear from him in the morning."

"Why should he wait for morning? If he wanted to offer an apology, he might have made it while he was here, and then there would have been no more bother."

"Apology? Major Stacey never apologizes. He will send you a challenge in the morning."

"Ah! is that his little game?"

"That is what he will do, sir, and he will kill you, as sure as you fight him. Major Stacey is a dead shot, sir. He has fought many duels, and has never missed his man."

"That seems to offer a bad prospect for me," mournfully remarked Fred. "That a man should insult me, and then kill me to pay for it, is pretty rough on an American citizen."

"There is only one way for you to get out of it, stranger."

"There is a way, then? A ray of sunlight in the midst of darkness! And, what is that way? Will an apology from me restrain his wrath and save my life?"

"No, sir. Major Stacey never accepts apologies. Your only chance is to light out, and I would advise you, as a friend, to get out of this town as quick as you can."

"How fortunate I am in finding a friend! Will you take a drink with me, sir?"

The friendly adviser hastened to accept the invitation.

"I wish you would kindly favor me with your name," observed Fred when he had finished his glass.

"My name is Alfred Stacey, sir."

"I am glad to have met you, Mr. Stacey, and I thank you for your advice. I have no doubt that it is good advice, and it may be useful to me some time, but not just now."

"What do you mean, sir? Do you expect to stay here and get killed?"

"Not exactly; but I expect to stay here. I am too much in love with Staceyville to leave it for a little matter. Please present my compliments to the gallant and distinguished gentleman who gave me his card, if you happen to meet him, and say to him that if he wants to fight I shall be proud to have the honor of killing him, though it will grieve me greatly to send to his grave a gentleman of the old style."

Flush Fred took his friend's arm, and they walked out of the bar-room.

Mr. Alfred Stacey gazed after them with a puzzled look, and then chuckled as he turned to his friends.

"That's all blow," said he—"nothing but a big bluff. The fellow is nearly scared out of his boots, and I'll bet high that he sneaks out of Staceyville to-night."

It was well for Alfred Stacey that nobody was disposed to bet with him on that point, as Flush Fred was not so easily scared, and he

showed no inclination to sneak out of Staceyville.

He went with Ben Stanniford direct to the room which they occupied in common, and there they quietly went to bed.

"Do you look upon that affair as meaning something serious, Fred?" inquired Ben as they were undressing.

"I must admit that I do. It seems to me to be a made-up scheme to get rid of me. The chances are that my Major Stacey is really a duelist, and that he has been put forward to play this game for the purpose of scaring me away or killing me. It don't seem to me that they are likely to win at either end of the game."

"Then there is a risk, Fred, and I can't allow you to run any such risk for me."

"It's not for you, my boy. Those Staceys have a grudge against me because I won their money, and they want to work it out. No, it's not for you. I came to Staceyville to please Miss Marks, and I shall stay here to please myself."

"Have you ever fought a duel?"

"No. I have had plenty of fights, but nothing in that line."

"If that man is used to duels, and is a dead-shot, as he is said to be, what sort of a chance will you have?"

"I will have whisky on my side, for one thing. But you needn't worry about that, Ben. I will play the game for all it is worth, and you won't have to copper me to win."

So they both went to bed, and slept as placidly as if no question of life or death were involved in the expected duel.

CHAPTER VII.

A CHALLENGE ACCEPTED.

AFTER breakfast the next morning, when Henning and Stanniford were smoking their cigars on the veranda of the hotel, the proprietor came to them and informed them that Colonel Stacey wished to see Mr. Henning.

"So it is the colonel this time," observed Fred. "Are you sure that it is not the major, Mr. Taintor?"

"This is Colonel Jeff Stacey; but I reckon he comes from the major. He wanted to know if you were here, and seemed to be surprised when I told him that you were, and then he said that he had some mighty particular business with you."

"If it is a duel, tell him that I will be happy to see him," said Fred, as if duels were ordinary and pleasant incidents of his life.

Yes, it was an invitation to a duel, and Colonel Jeff Stacey did not appear to be well pleased with the turn the affair had taken.

He had doubtless supposed, as others had, that Fred Henning would have been frightened off; but there sat that obnoxious individual, calm and contented, wearing his usual pleasant but determined look.

The colonel came to the front manfully, however, and stated his errand with a martial mixture of dignity and firmness.

"My cousin, Majah Stacey, sah," said he, "has sent me with a message to you, which, I am obliged to say, is a hostile message."

"And what is it?" calmly inquired Henning. "You insulted the majah last night, sah, and he demands satisfaction for the insult."

"I hope he don't want an apology. Any satisfaction but that I am ready to give him. But perhaps he wants to offer an apology."

"No, sah, Majah Stacey has nothing to apologize for. You struck him, sah."

"Yes, and knocked him down, and he thoroughly deserved it. He gave the insult."

"Do you want to challenge the majah, sah?"

"Oh, no, I am very well satisfied with the situation as it stands."

"But you say that you were the insulted party," insisted Colonel Jeff.

"No doubt of it; but it seems to me that I attended to that part of the business. I do not feel the need of satisfaction; but, if Major Stacey requires anything in that line, I shall be happy to accommodate him."

Colonel Jeff was somewhat discomfited by his failure to induce the common adversary of the Staceys to take the attitude of the challenging party, which might, under the circumstances, have given them a considerable advantage; but there were plenty of Staceys, and the chances in any event ought to be on their side.

So he recurred to his errand as it originally was, and proceeded to do his duty.

"I must request you then, sah, to favor me with the name of a friend of yours who will arrange the preliminaries of the hostile encounter."

"I will take pleasure in doing so; but I must first find the friend, as I am a stranger here, and I will send him to you as soon as possible."

Colonel Jeff Stacey was obliged to be satisfied with this, and he left the hotel none too well pleased with the result of his mission.

Flush Fred turned to Charley Taintor.

"Do you belong to the Staceys, Mr. Taintor?" he inquired.

"I am not a member of the Stacey family, Mr. Henning, and I do not belong, if I know

myself, to anybody but Charley Taintor and his wife."

"Then I must ask you to serve me in this matter. Will you act as my second?"

"I will gladly do anything in my power to oblige you, Mr. Henning, but I don't want to help you into your grave."

"I will look out for that end of the line."

"Where do I come in, Fred?" Ben Stanniford wanted to know. "Have you gone back on me as a friend?"

"No, indeed, my boy; but you don't come in as the kind of friend I want for this little emergency, unless you may show up in the capacity of a mourner at the graveyard end of the line."

"This is not a thing to joke about, Mr. Henning," protested the landlord. "Major Stacey comes of dueling stock, and he has the reputation of being a sure shot."

"That is just what I claim to be," observed Flush Fred.

"It looks to me as if he means to kill you, sir."

"It looks to me as if I am sure to kill him, if he comes to the scratch."

"This promises, then, to be a serious affair."

"It will be a serious affair, in my opinion, for Major Stacey. If you will come up to my room, Mr. Taintor, we will settle the details of the encounter. Don't worry about me, Ben, as you shall be posted in the arrangements as soon as they are completed."

Ben Stanniford was not at all satisfied with this disposition of affairs; but he perceived that it would be useless for him to object to what his friend did or proposed to do, and he gazed mournfully after Fred and the landlord as they went to their consultation.

Fred Henning briefly stated the terms upon which he proposed to fight the duel with Major Stacey, and Charley Taintor raised his voice in horrified protest.

"That will be murder," he exclaimed.

"What of it?" replied Henning. "If the man wants to murder me, I have an equal right to try and murder him."

"It will be suicide."

"There will be one less Stacey in Staceyville, though that don't count for much among so many. The truth is, Mr. Taintor, I've got to make a stand against these Staceys. They want to back me down, and if I allow one of them to do it, every Stacey in Staceyville will feel him himself licensed to kick me. They have put this Major Stacey forward to down me, and I must make him sick of his job or throw up the sponge."

After some persuasion Charley Taintor consented to act as the second of the up-river man, and proceeded to the hostile camp to arrange for the encounter.

He found Major Stacey attended by Colonel Jeff Stacey and several other Staceys, and his statement of the intentions of their common adversary fell among them like a bombshell.

"I have come at the request of Mr. Fred Henning," said he, "to act as his second in his difficulty with Major Stacey. I wanted to keep out of the scrape; but I was the only acquaintance the man had in town, and he insisted that I should serve."

"It would have been better for him to leave town," suggested Colonel Jeff.

"I have no doubt that it would have been better under the circumstances."

"You might have advised him to do so."

"Oh, I gave him plenty of good advice, but it was all thrown away. He seems to be crazy for a fight."

"That is highly satisfactory," put in Major Stacey. "If he wants a fight, he shall be accommodated to his heart's content. Now, Mr. Taintor, if you will arrange the terms with Colonel Stacey, we will soon settle the case of that fellow."

"I suppose he understands that Major Stacey is a dead shot," observed Colonel Jeff.

"He seems to think that there will be two dead shots in the affair," answered the landlord, "and I don't know but he may be right, under the circumstances, as I said."

"His cheek would stop a bullet, I suppose; but I don't see any other chance for him under any circumstances. What are the terms then? Pistols at ten paces? He surely can't have the face, sah, to demand a bigger distance than that."

"He don't. He wants a less distance."

"What's that, sah? A less distance? What do you mean by a less distance than ten paces?"

"He proposes to fight Major Stacey with revolvers at two paces, the men to fire at the word across a handkerchief."

CHAPTER VIII.

THE DUEL.

To characterize this statement as a bombshell would be to describe it weakly and inadequately.

If a mine had been exploded under the Staceys, the effect could hardly have been more appalling.

Major Stacey's purple face, turned livid, Colonel Jeff stared aghast at the speaker, and the

other Staceys present were astonished beyond the power of utterance.

"Those are his terms," continued Charley Taintor, who could not help enjoying the situation to a certain extent, "and he insists upon their acceptance, and says that the sooner the affair comes off, the better he will be pleased."

"Do you know what you are saying, sah?" demanded Colonel Jeff. "If I am not mistaken in the words you used, it seems to me that you must be joking."

"That's it," joined in the major. "Charley is—ah—trying to run a saw on us, as I may say. But you should remembah, Mr. Taintor, sah, that you are dealing with gentlemen, sah, and that joking on a subject of this nachah, sah, don't go—it don't go at all, sah."

This style of talk put Charley Taintor on his mettle.

"I reckon I know how to deal with gentlemen," said he. "If I don't, it is rather late in the day for me to learn, and I am not asking anybody to teach me."

"Your friend Henning, then, should remember that he is dealing with gentlemen."

"Well, sir, as you don't consider him a gentleman, I can't see that you have any call to worry about his ways. For all I know, he may have as bad an opinion of you as you have of him. Anyhow, I can assure you as a solid fact that there is no sign of a joke in what he says. He means business, and is ready to step right up to the rack, fodder or no fodder."

"Such terms were never heard of among gentlemen," protested Colonel Stacey.

"They are Fred Henning's terms, though—just that, and nothing else—and he means to stick to them. Whether he is a gentleman or not, I am ready to bet that he is clear grit all the way through."

"This is barbarous, sah, abominably barbarous. It means nothing less than murder."

"Not on Mr. Henning's part. He gives the major the same chances that he takes for himself. As the major is a dead shot, my man wants to be a dead shot, too."

"The terms are quite inadmissible, sah."

"Of course they are," broke in the major.

"Entirely inadmissible."

"Very well, then. All you have to do is to withdraw your challenge, and the affair will be settled as far as you are concerned. Mr. Henning seems to know his rights and to be determined to stand on them. As the challenged party it is his business to dictate the terms of the meeting, and he has dictated them. If they don't suit you, you can throw up your hand and quit the game."

This put a very serious face on the affair, and the Staceys found themselves in an unexpected predicament.

The obnoxious person had not run away as he should have done, and was evidently determined not to be killed in a duel without killing his antagonist.

Bloody and barbarous as his terms were, they were not "inadmissible" in the dueling sense, and he had a right to insist upon them.

Nobody could have supposed that any man would deliberately shut out every chance of escaping alive from such an encounter; but that was just what Fred Henning had done.

It would have been much better to raise a mob of Staceys and drive him out of town; but it was then too late for that, and the present emergency must be met in some way.

To withdraw the challenge would be such a back-down and confession of weakness as would destroy the fair reputation of Major Stacey as a professed duelist, and at the same time make a hero of the very objectionable interloper.

Nothing could be worse than that—unless, indeed, the certain death of Major Stacey if he should accede to the terms proposed.

As this was a matter that required consideration, Colonel Jeff asked for a little time, to allow him to consult with Major Stacey and his friends.

Charley Taintor left them to themselves; but "still he lingered near," like Mary's little lamb, feeling pretty confident just then that his guest would come out of the affair with flying colors.

The pros and cons of the case were stated by Colonel Jeff with considerable exactness and detail, but with one important exception—he made no allusion to the certain death of the two duelists in the event of the duel.

"It's no use talking," declared the major, who was nervously impatient while this argument was going on. "There is only one thing to do, as Charley Taintor says, and that is to withdraw the challenge."

"That is out of the question!" protested the colonel, and the rest of the Staceys present echoed him.

"I don't see how it is out of the question," peevishly replied the major. "If you can't persuade or force that fellow to fight in a civilized way, like a gentleman, I don't propose to fight him!"

"You can't mean that, major! The affair is not to be shuffled off in that way. That you, a hero of the Mexican war, a man who has a reputation all over Mississippi for being as fear-

less as he is skillful, should weaken and back down before a person of that class, a Northern mudsill, a common river gambler, is simply impossible."

"I don't see any impossibility about it."

"Just think of the hole it would put us in."

"Just think of the hole it is sure to put me in if I go on with it."

"Think of the credit and honor of the Staceys, major. That is what you've got to maintain."

"Who will maintain the credit and honor of the Staceys when I am in my grave? Are any of you ready to do it? If so, you can take this job off my hands."

"That is impossible, major, as you know. It was you who issued the challenge, and the man would not accept a substitute."

"How do you know he wouldn't? Suppose you offer yourself, Jeff."

"He would never admit such an offer. Besides, major, I am a married man, and you have neither wife nor children dependent on you. It is my notion, now, that if you carry a stiff upper lip, and agree to the man's terms, or make them worse if you can, he will back out when he comes to the scratch."

"I wish I could believe that."

After considerable persuasion Major Stacey put himself in the hands of his second, and consented to go on and sacrifice himself for "the credit and honor of the Staceys," though it was sufficiently evident to his relatives there present that his heart was not in the work.

Charley Taintor was called in and informed of the conclusion at which the conclave had arrived.

If there was any special exhibition of "stiff upper lip" on that occasion, it was given by him, rather than by Major Stacey or any of the other Staceys.

He declared that his friend would be delighted to learn that his terms had been finally accepted, and went away in apparent high spirits, though he was glum enough when he got back to the hotel.

He gave Fred Henning a detailed account of his negotiations, together with the opinion that the Staceys had been so backward in coming forward as to make it sure that they were not a bit inclined to fight.

Still, the fact remained that they had finally accepted Henning's terms, and that the duel was arranged to take place at five o'clock the next morning.

"It is settled, then," remarked Flush Fred, "and the rest of the business is simple."

"I am not sure that it is such a very simple matter," replied Taintor. "They were so very slow about accepting your terms, that I am afraid they mean to play roots on us in some way."

"Let them play what they please. I never saw the game yet that I was not willing to take a hand in, and I can assure you, Mr. Taintor, that if I don't get away from them alive, there will be at least one Stacey less in Staceyville."

On this point Fred Henning was set as solid as the Rock of Gibraltar, and the landlord, who had become heartily his friend, was soon convinced that no arguments would avail with him.

Ben Stanniford was very anxious to know the turn the affair had taken, and his anxiety was not decreased when his friend took him into his confidence.

He persisted in expressing his belief that it was for his sake Flush Fred was exposing himself to certain death, and earnestly protested against the sacrifice; but his entreaties were as useless as Charley Taintor's arguments.

"I am going into this on my own account, and it is all settled," declared Fred. "Here is my will, and I want you to take care of it. I have no near kin, and the little that I own will go to the child of a dead friend of mine. So it is settled, Ben."

"It is not settled. This must not go on. I can't bear to think of it."

"I understand you, Ben, and you know that you are a friend of whom I am very fond; but you must also understand that in this matter I allow no man to interfere with me. When my head is set upon doing anything, that is what I am sure to do."

"I mean to see you through this thing, though, as far as I can, and I will be on hand in the morning."

"I wish you would not, Ben. To speak plainly, there is a chance of a disturbance to-morrow morning, and I think that you, for the sake of the young lady up there in the Stacey house, ought to keep yourself safe. I do wish that you would stay away from the difficulty."

This did not prevent Ben Stanniford from being on hand in the morning, as he had said he would be, and he was not the only person who was there to look after the interests of Fred Henning.

Charley Taintor, fearing as he had said that there might be an attempt to "play roots" on his guest, had notified a few of his friends, who were not in any way connected with the Stacey family, to be present and overlook the affair, and they were there.

There was also a considerable delegation of the Staceys on hand, including Judge Stacey's son Tom; but, if they had contemplated any unfair play, they were doubtless discouraged by the presence of the other spectators.

The meeting took place in a grove at a little distance from the village, and it was somewhat later than the hour agreed upon when the parties were ready for action.

Flush Fred, though his face was pale, wore his usual pleasant and determined look; but his adversary was neither pale nor smiling.

Indeed, he had the appearance of a man who has sat up all night, in order to rise early in the morning.

Henning had said that he counted on whisky as an ally in his present difficulty, and Ben Stanniford thought that he understood the meaning of that remark when Major Stacey came on the ground.

That gentleman had been a hard drinker for a long time—one of those steady and constant soakers who are never known to be drunk, though they seldom, if ever, draw a sober breath.

Flush Fred's experience with "all sorts and conditions" of bibulous people had at the first view in the Stacey House bar-room made him acquainted with the major's anti-temperance proclivities, and he had drawn conclusions from them that seemed likely to be verified.

The major, having been forced by his friends to remain in a predicament which was far beyond his expectations, and which he could contemplate only with the most serious dissatisfaction, had felt the need of nerve to carry him through the ordeal, and had naturally resorted to whisky to supply the nerve.

He had drank a good deal more than his friends supposed he had, having a private flask concealed upon his person, with which he had soaked himself after they had put him to bed with the expectation that he would get a good sleep.

The result was that his physical and mental condition the next morning was flabby, and he was better fitted for a hospital than for the "field of honor."

He was not drunk—that could never be said of Major Stacey—but his face was deeply purple, and there was an uncertain and wavering look in his eyes, and he watched the proceedings stupidly, as if his mind was not in working order.

The required two paces were stepped off, Charley Taintor insisting that they should be short ones, and a scratch was made at each end of the measurement, which the combatants were to toe.

Midway between the scratches a handkerchief was to be stretched, held at each end by the seconds, and across the handkerchief the duelists were to fire at the word.

Colonel Jeff Stacey and Charley Taintor tossed up for the word, and it was won by the latter, which was supposed to give some sort of an advantage to his principal, if there could be any possible advantage in such a duel.

The revolvers to be used were examined and handed to the principals by their seconds, who then took their places, each holding at arm's length an end of the longest handkerchief that could be procured.

The principals were called upon to come to the scratch, and Flush Fred stepped forward briskly, his cocked revolver in his hand, and his eyes on his adversary.

Major Stacey was slower to toe the mark, and his look was so strange that it excited the apprehensions of his friends; but they could do nothing just then to help or advise him.

The word was to be "One, two, fire!" and Charley Taintor began to give it, averting his eyes from the duelists as he did so.

At the word "One" there was a startling change in the programme.

Major Stacey, with a gasping cry, dropped his revolver, turned, and ran away as fast as his legs could carry him.

They did not carry him very far, as he stumbled and fell before he had gone fifty feet, and then he lay where he fell, like a dead man.

CHAPTER IX.

FLUSH FRED'S QUEER ALLY.

If "playing roots" were intended by the Stacey faction, it was just then that something of the kind might be expected to occur, and Charley Taintor glanced around at his friends, as if to warn them against danger; but the Staceys merely stared as if stupefied in the direction the major had taken, apparently unable to make a move or utter a word.

Flush Fred did nothing to aggravate his adversaries, and only a quiet and gentlemanly smile of surprise showed that he was aware of the escapade.

"I am afraid that Major Stacey has been taken ill," Flush Fred remarked sarcastically, as he lowered his revolver and stepped back.

Perhaps his disposition to let his antagonist down easy was not appreciated by the friends of the latter; but his explanation of Major Stacey's breakdown was the most plausible that

could be given, and it ought to have pleased them.

The major, in fact, as his friends discovered when they reached him, had fallen in a fit, from which he was not easily revived, and then he was in a precarious condition.

Flush Fred and his party did not wait for any further details.

"This ends the affair as far as we are concerned," said Charley Taintor to Colonel Jeff Stacey. "I wish you good-morning, and hope that the major will soon get well."

Colonel Jeff answered him rather ungraciously, to the effect that he did not care a continental whether the major got well or not.

Perhaps he did not, as it would be difficult to imagine how the affair could have turned out worse for the Staceys.

It would have been much better for them if they had joined the major in his wish to refuse the dueling terms proposed by Flush Fred and to withdraw the challenge.

That would have been a bad enough back-down, but nothing like so bad as the actual outcome of the meeting.

Major Stacey had disgraced himself and all the rest of the Staceys, and the only excuse for his cowardly and shameful conduct had been offered by his adversary.

This was too much, and there was not a Stacey who could do justice to the subject.

Charley Taintor left the ground with his principal, accompanied by Ben Stanniford and all the others who were not Staceys.

"I think you are well out of that scrape, Mr. Henning," remarked the landlord.

"I think so, too; but the affair ended pretty much as I expected it to."

"You don't mean to say that you thought you had a sure thing?"

"Not exactly that; but I looked for some sort of a back-down or break-down on the part of the other side."

"It might have turned out differently," interposed Ben Stanniford.

"If it had, I would have been ready for whatever might have happened. You must understand, Ben, that it was absolutely necessary for me to make a stand against these Staceys, once for all, and it seemed to me that there was but one way to do and make a sure thing of it."

"As it turned out, your stand has put you on the top of the Staceys; but it was a big risk to run, and it is not to be supposed that they will submit to being stood on for any great length of time."

"I am not worrying about the Staceys, Ben. If they want to worry about me, they may worry as much as they please. I am well satisfied with things as they stand."

Flush Fred had good reason to be satisfied with things as they stood.

The story of his encounter with Major Stacey was quickly spread in Staceyville and the surrounding country, and the man who had backed down the lion of the tribe of Stacey at once became a hero.

Even those who sympathized with the Staceys or were closely connected with the tribe, came to take a look at him and satisfy their curiosity concerning him.

Thus the bar of Charley Taintor's hotel did a rushing business for a while, and Flush Fred was so overwhelmed with invitations to drink that he might have soaked himself into a state of insanity at the expense of others.

Fred Henning, however, was not what might be termed a drinking man.

He "took his drinks" with friends and acquaintances, afloat and ashore; but it was to be noticed that he handled the public's enemy, as one may say, with the tips of his fingers, and that his drinking was seldom anything more than a matter of business or politeness.

Therefore he kept away from the bar-room as much as he reasonably could, and was very modest in accepting the congratulations that were offered him, being apparently more ready to make excuses for the back-down of his late antagonist than to plume himself upon his easy victory.

In the evening, when the excitement had partially subsided, and the delegates from the outlying regions had mostly returned to their homes, Flush Fred was seated on the open veranda in front of the hotel with Ben Stanniford and Charley Taintor.

They were placidly smoking their cigars, enjoying the evening air, and conversing with the understanding that the subject of the Staceys was to be dropped for the present.

Next door to the hotel was Gus Hite's general store, with some empty dry goods boxes in front of it, on which a few citizens were seated, whittling and talking, and probably wishing that some liberal person would invite them to the bar of the hotel.

Down the street, jumping, walking on his hands, and performing various antics in his erratic progress, came a queer specimen of humanity, who stopped in front of Hite's store, and redoubled his acrobatic exertions for the benefit of the citizens there.

He was doubtless making an exhibition of himself for the purpose of collecting small

change and other gifts from the spectators; but it was at the same time evident that his success in that line was nothing to speak of.

When he did finally receive a gift, the manner of its reception was something to stare at.

One of the sitters tossed him a small coin, which he caught in his mouth as a trained dog catches a bit of meat that is thrown to him.

Flush Fred had eyed the young acrobat with interest, and this exhibition brightened his interest.

"There is something or somebody," said he, "who might pick up a small fortune in a city, unless he should fall into bad ways and bring up in the State Prison; but that would be the most likely thing for him to do. Who is he, Mr. Taintor?"

"That is the neighborhood vagabond," answered the landlord. "Do you want to know more about him?"

"Yes."

Taintor beckoned to the lad, who immediately turned a handspring and brought up standing in front of the veranda.

"Catch this," ordered Flush Fred as he tossed a silver coin into the air.

The lad opened his capacious mouth, jumped at the coin, and easily caught it on the fly.

He pulled it out, examined it with snapping eyes, and bit it to make sure that he was not being deceived by a counterfeit.

The men on the veranda had a good look at him, and Flush Fred scrutinized him closely.

He was a well-grown boy, probably under twenty, though he might easily have been mistaken for an older person, tall and slim and lithe, as agile as if built of spring steel, and evidently as tough as he was agile.

His face, though beardless, was strongly suggestive of the monkey tribe; yet a very bright human intelligence shone from his black eyes.

As for clothing, he had none that was worth speaking of—a pair of ragged trousers held up by a homemade suspender, a dirty tow shirt, and that was all—no shoes, and no covering for his shabby black hair.

"Dat's all right," he said, as he raised his snapping eyes to the veranda, with a queer mixture of the negro and the white man in his speech.

"Dat's all right. I like dat. Reckon I know a gen'lemen when I see um."

"Come up here," ordered Flush Fred, and he made a hand-spring from the board walk to the veranda.

"What is your name?" asked Henning.

"Jake Tolliver, an' I comes from de ole stock o' Tollivers, I does. My daddy's one o' de richest men in Geo'gy; but he an' me didn't hitch hosses, and I skinned out, I did."

This statement was taken for what it was worth, inducing the suspicion that there might be a trace of negro blood in the lad's veins.

"Where do you live, Jake?"

"Anywhar an' nowhar—wid de niggas an' de whites, but more wid de niggas dan wid de white folks. Dey don't none ob 'em lemme stay around long at a time, 'ca'se dey say I've got de devil in me too strong."

"You seem to be honest in your talk. Are you honest in other things?"

"Dunno. Never stole nothin' as big as a hoss; but I mought. Reckon I've nigh about played out dis kentry, though, and will have to hunt anodder stampin' ground."

"How would you like to get a good job of work to do before you go away—a job that will suit you and pay you well?"

"Like it fuss-rate."

"Can you catch a half-dollar in your mouth?"

"Jest gimme de chance—dat's all."

"Go out there, then, and I will pitch you one."

The lad handsprung himself from the veranda to the street, and Flush Fred pitched a silver coin high in the air.

Jake Tolliver could not wait for it to fall into his open mouth, but jumped at it and caught it on the fly as easily as he had caught the quarter.

Evidently overjoyed by his good luck, he bounced back on the veranda, his eyes snapping faster than ever.

"Whar's dat job?" he eagerly demanded.

"Come into the house with me," answered Henning. "I want to talk to you."

Flush Fred led the way into the hotel, closely followed by Jake Tolliver, leaving Taintor and Stanniford to wonder what kind of a freak had got hold of their friend.

When he had introduced his strange guest into his own room, Henning closed the door, sat down, and looked at Jake Tolliver as if he meant to size him up carefully.

"Whar's dat job?" demanded the lad, who grew a little suspicious under this scrutiny.

"Don't be too impatient," replied the scrutinizer. "Folks lose more than they gain by impatience. Are you quite sure that you belong to nobody, and nobody belongs to you?"

"Dead shuah."

"And you have no kin anywhere about here?"

"Jest nowhar."

"Any particular friends among the people around Staceyville?"

"Dey all hates me."

"How do you feel toward the Stacey family?"
 "Hates 'em jest as bad as dey hates me."
 "Now, Jake, how would you like to belong to me?"

"Like it fuss-rate, sah."
 "Then I will buy you from yourself, and will pay you a good price if you serve me well. Can you creep where nobody can see you, hide where nobody can find you, and climb where nobody can get at you?"

"You jest bet I kin."
 "How about that big mouth of yours? I see that you can open it very handily. Can you keep it shut if it is worth your while to do so?"

"Dead shet."
 "Then I will tell you what I want you to do. Do you know Judge Stacey, who lives in the big house on the hill back of here?"

"Durn him!" ejaculated Jake, as his face darkened under the remembrance of some injury or insult from that quarter.

"So you do know him. Well, Jake, I want you to go to his house."
 "He'll kick me out."

"He must not know that you are there. You must be in his house, and all over and about his house; but he must know nothing about it. I want you to understand every word I say, Jake, and I know that you are smart enough for that. I want you to see everything that goes on at Judge Stacey's place, and hear everything that is said there; but you must not be seen or heard, unless you can pick up some news from the black folks about the house. Do you understand me now?"

"Reckon dar'll be rats in dat house befo' long," curtly replied Jake.

"So you do understand me. There is a young lady in that house, Jake, a handsome young lady who lately came there, and her name is Eva Bramwell. I want to know all about that young lady—how she is, what she does, and what is done to her. Will the job suit you?"

"Fuss-rate—better'n coon-huntin'."
 "Then you may begin it right away. Go there now, and in the morning come and tell me all you have seen and heard. Then you shall have this."

Flush Fred held up a silver dollar, and the lad's eyes glistened as he gazed at the coveted coin.

First a quarter, then a half, and then a whole dollar.

It was wonderful luck for the neighborhood vagabond.

"There will be more of the same kind for you," continued Fred, "and I will pay you well if you serve me well. When you want anything to eat, come here, and Mr. Taintor will feed you. But you must be sure to keep your mouth shut to everybody but me."

"Dead shet, sah."
 Henning returned to the veranda, followed by Jake Tolliver, who went away without a word to anybody.

"I am curious to know what you have been doing with that boy, Mr. Henning," observed the landlord when Fred had resumed his seat.

"I have been taking him into my employment, and I think I can make him useful."

"If you can get any good out of him, you will do more than anybody else has been able to do."

"I think there is good in him, though, Mr. Taintor. When I saw him catch things with his mouth, he reminded me of a dog, and it seems to me that he has some of the good qualities of a dog. I am glad I found him."
 "I wish you luck with him."

CHAPTER X. COUSIN ARABELLA.

It is not too much to say that the Stacey family were "all broke up" by the unfortunate ending of the encounter with Flush Fred.

They had advertised among themselves their intention of driving away or making an end of that obnoxious individual, and had even boasted of it before some people who could not claim the honor of being Staceys.

That such a well-considered scheme, in which all the advantages were apparently on their side, should have such an ignominious ending, was aggravating almost beyond endurance.

It worried them to such an extent that they could not treat the unfortunate major decently or care for him properly.

The fallen hero was carried from the field of honor upon a plank, and a physician was called in, and it was evident that a long and serious spell of illness was before him.

There were but few Staceys visible in Staceyville during the remainder of the day, as the prevailing disposition of the clan was to sulk, to keep out of sight, and to discuss the late sorrowful affair among themselves.

Tom Stacey, as soon as the condition of the major was ascertained, started toward his home with the declared intention of carrying the ill news to his father, to whom it had seemed inadvisable to be present at the duel, and who was anxiously awaiting the result at his house.

Tom did not then go home, however, but allowed considerable time to elapse between the intention and its execution.

His duty to himself and his family compelled him, in his opinion, in view of the recent distressing circumstances, to "fill up" before doing any thing else, so that his indignation might reach the proper height, and his brain might be stimulated to construct a scheme of revenge.

As a matter of course, his indignation grew maudlin, and his brain became too badly muddled to conceive anything but more muddledment.

He did not trust himself near the Staceyville Hotel for the purpose of "filling up," and even kept away from Staceyville, directing the course of his faithful steed to a crossroads grocery not far away, where he could procure distilled spirits of great potency, vintage of the present year, warranted to "make drunk come."

He found those spirits ready to materialize, and soaked himself with them until he reached the proverbial condition of the "b'iled owl."

He was able to sit up on his horse, however, when he left the "grocery" at a late hour of the night, and that intelligent and always sober animal had sense enough to know the way home and take him there.

At home a "boy" was waiting to take care of the horse and himself, and he was duly put to bed.

Thus Judge Stacey got no news of that disastrous duel from his only son.

He got the news soon enough, and straight enough, however, and it saddened him so that his household had a hard time during the rest of that day.

His sadness was increased by the fact that Tom did not come home, and there could be no doubt as to what had become of him.

It reached a climax when Tom came down at a late hour the next morning, wearing a "banged up" look, and with the "head on" which his father was so well acquainted with.

"So here you are at last," was the gruff greeting of Judge Stacey. "You look as if you had passed the night in a cocklebur patch, and I reckon you did much worse than that. I thought you were going to come straight home yesterday morning and tell me how that affair of the major's turned out."

"I meant to do so, pap; but it turned out so much worse than any of us expected, that I had to stay a while and help look after things."

"What did you look after?"

"I thought it best to talk the matter over with the others and consult as to what ought to be done. I was sure that you would get the news soon, anyhow."

"Yes, it came quick enough, for that matter. It takes bad news to travel. I believe it can beat the telegraph. And so you were consulting. What did it say when you consulted it?"

"What did what say?"

"The whisky barrel."

"I don't understand you, sir."

"I understand you, though. The only consultation you had was with a whisky barrel, and the barrel kept its end up and got the best of it every time. That is the only kind of consultation you are good for, and that is always too much for you. If you keep on at this rate, it won't be long before you consult yourself into your grave."

"You are mighty hard on me," protested Tom. "I am not near as bad that way as you make me out to be."

"Bad enough, anyhow. How is the major getting on?"

"I haven't heard from him lately."

"I have, though. He is in a bad way, and it will be a wonder if he pulls through. The doctor says that he is in a bad way, and has ordered every kind of liquor to be kept from him."

"If they shut down on his whisky, that will kill him," suggested Tom from the depths of his experience.

"If he can't live without keeping himself soaked, he had better die, and he is not the only one who is in that fix. I tell you, Tom, if you care anything for yourself or anybody else, you have got to straighten up and try to be a man. Things are going rapidly from bad to worse with us, and the only chance to save us from utter ruin is for you to marry your cousin Eva."

"I would be glad enough to marry her, but she don't seem to want me."

"Who would want to have anything to do with a young fellow who is so often drunk and disagreeable? You don't give the girl a chance to care for you. That is why I tell you that you must straighten up."

"Perhaps it ain't so much that she dislikes me, pap, as that she is fond of somebody else."

"Whatever it is, she will have to marry you. We must fix that up. We can't fool around much longer."

"If we could get rid of that lover of hers, who is hanging around Staceyville, we would have an easier row to hoe."

"Easy or hard, we've got to hoe it. The young chap don't worry me as much as his friend, the river sport who robbed us both on the boat. That is a dangerous man, in every way, and it is a great pity that the major weakened and broke down when he came to the

scratch. We might have spared the major if he had wiped out that scoundrel. We need to get rid of them both, Tom; but I can't go on without your help, and you must straighten up and attend to business."

While Judge Stacey and his son were discussing these worrisome affairs, there was an arrival at the house.

It was to be expected that some of the Staceys would call during the day to consult with the judge and bring news of the condition of the major; but this was an arrival of a stranger.

Not only a stranger, but a woman.

She was brought there in a buggy, driven by a colored man, and the buggy had evidently come from the landing.

It contained, besides herself and the driver, her baggage, which consisted of a large leather valise and a band-box.

When the vehicle halted at the door she alighted without assistance, and ordered the driver to hand down her "property," which she cared for to suit herself.

"You can go right along now," was her next direction, as she gesticulated with a baggy umbrella.

"You've been paid all you ought to have, and more, too, and if you think that I'm going to give you a quarter for nothing, that's your mistake. My folks didn't get rich that way. Go right along, now, and be careful that you don't drive over any of the shrubbery and things."

The driver looked as if he would like to bark her shins with a buggy wheel, but quietly obeyed her order.

Judge Stacey and Tom, whose talk had been interrupted by the sound of the wheels and the woman's shrill voice, had come out on the veranda, where they stared at the stranger rather impolitely.

She was a woman of that uncertain age which may be described as half-elderly, and in her voice and features and actions were the unmistakable indications of old-maidism.

She was dressed neatly for traveling, the only sign of shabbiness being the baggy umbrella, and wore a pair of gold-rimmed spectacles with big glasses.

She turned when the buggy had driven away, and greeted the two men on the veranda.

"Good-morning, Cousin Bramwell. That is your son Tom, I suppose. I am glad to see you both."

Judge Stacey mumbled something about the pleasure of meeting her; but the truth was that he did not know what to say.

As far as his remembrance went, he had never seen the woman before, and he had not the faintest idea who she might be, except that she addressed him as "cousin."

"My folks didn't get rich that way," he had heard her say to the driver of the buggy, and the remark was suggestive of wealth, and therefore, if for no other reason, she must be treated politely.

"You don't seem to know me," she remarked.

"Well, that is not at all strange, as I suppose you never saw me before. I am Arabella Stacey, from Kentucky, and a pretty close cousin of yours."

"I am very glad to see you, Cousin Arabella," answered the judge, as he stepped down and extended his hand.

"I don't remember to have met you before, but you are heartily welcome. Walk right in and make yourself at home. Never mind your baggage. I will see that it is attended to."

But Cousin Arabella persisted in watching her "property" until it was carried into the house, when she followed it, and seated herself in the room where Judge Stacey and his son had been conversing.

"My folks didn't get rich by letting their property lie around loose with nobody to watch it," she observed.

No doubt they did get rich, then, and Judge Stacey thought that he perceived in this member of the family the independence and assurance that wealth usually gives its possessor.

"You will pardon me for not recognizing you," said he, "as I did not know that I had a cousin Arabella."

"Maybe you remember your cousin, Marshall Stacey, Woodford county, Kentucky."

"I remember him, though I never met him but once."

"You will never meet him again in this world, as he is dead."

"I am sorry to hear it."

"It is a consolation, though, Cousin Bramwell, to know that he was well fixed. I was his only child, and all the property is mine now. I've got a big distillery in Woodford county, with fifty thousand dollars' worth of whisky stored away, and lots more in sight. Oh, we are just swimming in whisky up there."

Tom Stacey's eyes snapped as he gazed at this new cousin.

As she was probably unmarried, it was a pity that her years appeared to put her beyond his reach, together with her distillery.

"I suppose you married early," pointedly suggested the judge.

"Married? Not much! I was no such fool as that. I had lots of chances, of course; but I knew that they were after my money, and I

never let one of them get within smelling distance of it."

A black girl belonging on the place, who happened to come into the room, grinned and snickered as she stared at the stranger.

"What are you laughing at, you sassy imp?" indignantly demanded Cousin Arabella. "If you are laughing at me, you are laughing at two hundred thousand dollars!"

CHAPTER XI.

A SPY IN THE ENEMY'S CAMP.

Two hundred thousand dollars!

The negro girl was suddenly and ignominiously expelled from the room.

Judge Stacey and Tom felt their hearts warming toward their newly-discovered relative, and were ready to boil over with hospitality.

"It was very good in you," said the judge, "to take the trouble to hunt up your poor relations down here."

"I have not put myself out much to do so," answered Cousin Arabella. "I used to hear my father speak of Staceyville and his cousin, Bramwell, and I determined to come and take a look at you when I could make it convenient to do so. I had to go down to Orleans to look after my agent there, who has been managing so badly that I am afraid I shall have to take the business out of his hands, and it was an easy matter to stop off here."

"Do you manage your own affairs, then?" inquired the judge.

"Indeed I do. Do you suppose I would trust them to Tom, Dick or Harry? Not much! We never got rich that way. The business has grown in my hands, but I still keep hold of it, and I have not a relation living on either side except you folks down here. So it is no wonder that I wanted to come and see you."

It was a great blessing, in the opinion of Judge Stacey and Tom.

This plain-featured old maid of a cousin might be an angel come down from the heaven of Kentucky—a heaven where distilleries abound—and in the present muddled condition of their affairs, they could not cultivate her too carefully.

Though apparently not a marriageable person, she might be liberally inclined, and at Staceyville she could find a good field for the exercise of liberality.

So Cousin Arabella was warmly welcomed by Judge Stacey and Tom, treated with all the hospitality they were capable of, and given to understand that nothing in the house was good enough for her.

Tom Stacey, having the Kentucky distillery on his mind, made strenuous efforts to brace up, staying at home and restricting his drinks to a private bottle that he kept in his bedroom.

Cousin Arabella was soon made acquainted with Eva Bramwell, though that young lady was not introduced to her even as a distant cousin, because it was not necessary that Eva should divide the possible benefits of the distillery with her uncle's family.

Eva was looking as well as when she came down the river on the Tom Swann.

That is to say she appeared in good health; but there was a troubled and uneasy air about her that was not an indication of good spirits.

She started when she met the visitor, and her face flushed unaccountably.

She had little to say to her, but stared at her at first, and afterward looked at her curiously every now and then, as if there was something about her which she did not understand.

This strange proceeding on the part of the young lady was noticed by her uncle, who took her to task about it.

"Eva, why did you stare so much at Cousin Arabella? That is not a bit ladylike, to say the least of it."

"She reminds me so much of somebody I have met before," answered Eva.

"If you were ever in Woodford county, Kentucky, my dear," observed Cousin Arabella, "you may have met me."

"But I was never there."

Eva and Cousin Arabella got on well together, although their approach toward intimacy was not highly approved by Judge Stacey.

In the evening they contrived to get away from the rest of the family, and to stroll out of sight of the house, where they had a private and peculiar conversation.

"So you fancied that you had met me before, my dear," remarked Cousin Arabella.

"I was almost sure of it," answered Eva, "and I have not yet been able to get the fancy out of my head."

"Perhaps you thought that you might have met me on the steamboat when you came down the river."

"That is just what I did think."

"And you may have thought that I resembled an old maid named Martha Gibbs."

"I thought you resembled one of the best and dearest women I ever knew, and her name was Martha Gibbs."

"Thank you, my dear," said Cousin Arabella, as she pounced on the girl and kissed her. "It is very good of you to speak of me so kindly."

"Then you are Martha Gibbs?"

"Of course I am, and you knew me as soon as

you saw me, though you might not have supposed that I could be such an intense and exuberant liar. I would not have dared to show myself here if I had made the acquaintance on the boat of your uncle and your cousin, though they are both so very stupid. But here I am, and for the present I am their Cousin Arabella, and they are glad to have me here."

"I don't understand you, Martha. Where did you come from?"

"From Betty Marks's house. You know that she is living near here, and I am staying with her."

"Does she know that you have come to this place?"

"Indeed she does. She sent me here to act as a spy in the enemy's camp, to learn how you are getting on, and to ask you if you want any help. Do you think I am playing my part well?"

"Very well indeed, and I am ever so glad to see you, though I don't know how you can help me."

"You have friends who are able and willing to help you, my dear, if you need help. Of course you know that Mr. Stanniford and his friend Henning are in Staceyville."

"They have kept that news from me, and it was only by accident that I lately learned it. Then I heard that Mr. Henning had been fighting a duel with Major Stacey."

"He would have fought a duel, I suppose, if the other man had not broken down and run away. How is it with you, Eva? Mr. Stanniford will want to know how you are getting on."

"Not at all badly," answered Eva. "There is nothing to complain of. I have plenty to eat and drink, and a good place to sleep, and I am not so lonesome as you might suppose, though this is the dullest house I was ever in."

"Do they not persecute you?"

"Not yet, and I ought not to borrow trouble about the trials that may be awaiting me. Uncle Bramwell keeps telling me that it is settled that I am to marry his son Tom, and I have as little as possible to say about the matter."

"Tom, then, is not a very ardent wooer," suggested Miss Gibbs.

"He is always so full of something else that is ardent, that he has been no sort of a wooer as yet. I fancy that he is trying to get his spirits up to the wooing point; but you know, Martha dear, that I can have no use for such a lover as that."

"Of course you can't. I suppose that I might marry Tom and take him off your hands; but the case is not so desperate as to demand such a desperate remedy. Do you want to get away from here, Eva?"

"I would prefer to be somewhere else, no doubt; but I have no just cause for running away. Uncle Bramwell is my guardian, you know, and I was put in his care by my dear mother. So I ought to stay here as long as I can."

"Perhaps you are right about that, Eva; but we must find some way to communicate with you, so that when you do want to leave we may have a chance to take you away. Now we had better go back to the house, or they may suspect us of conspiring."

CHAPTER XII.

"RATS!"

COUSIN ARABELLA, saying that she was not accustomed to staying alone at night, asked permission to share Eva's room with her.

As she was just then a person of special consideration in the Stacey establishment, her request was granted, though "Cousin Bramwell" was not pleased by the friendliness of those two.

Some time after they had retired, and when the entire household was sunk in slumber and in silence, Eva was awakened by a noise that sounded like a scratching against the side of the house.

She sat up instantly, and startled her sleeping companion by a piercing scream.

"What is the matter, Eva?" demanded Cousin Arabella, as her eyes flew open.

She was at once as wide awake as the girl was, with all her wits about her, and with nerve enough for any emergency.

"I saw a face at the window," answered Eva. "A noise like climbing woke me, and then I saw that face; but it disappeared immediately. Did you hear nothing?"

"Nothing at all. I was sound asleep. But I am wide enough awake now, and we will soon know if there is anybody about to bother us."

Cousin Arabella jumped out of bed, threw up the window, and looked out.

"There is nobody there," she said, "nor any sign of anybody."

"I am sure that I heard that noise and saw that face," remarked Eva.

"I will try to fix things so that it will not occur again."

Cousin Arabella closed the shutter, fastened it on the inside, and put down the window.

Then steps were heard in the hall, and somebody knocked at the door.

It was Judge Stacey who knocked, and he wanted to know the cause of the scream he had heard.

The scare was explained to him through the closed door, and he grumbled at having been disturbed.

"It must have been a cat," he grunted. "You women-folks ought not to get scared too easy."

As the window opened on the roof of a veranda, there was a good chance for a cat or a human being to climb up.

Cousin Arabella and Eva went back to bed, and silence again took possession of the house.

The young lady, however, had been so thoroughly awakened by her startling adventure, that she could not easily return to the Land of Nod, and she lay awake, listening and watching for she knew not what.

In the course of an hour or so something occurred that justified her wakefulness.

A door slammed loudly, and then there was the noise of a rapid pattering of feet in the hall, followed by the gruff voice of Judge Stacey, who was growling and swearing, the sound indicating that he was pursuing something or somebody.

Then there was a pistol-shot, and after that silence again.

Cousin Arabella was already out of bed once more, and she made Eva get up, and they both hurried on a portion of their garments, being naturally curious to learn what was the matter, as well as unable to sleep under such circumstances.

The elder lady opened the door cautiously at first, peeped out, and then threw it wide open.

"Come, Eva," she said; "it is only your Uncle Bramwell."

The hall was dimly lighted from a lamp that was burning at the foot of the stairs near the front door, and the woman saw Judge Stacey, clad only in his shirt and trowsers.

He had apparently just mounted the stairway, and was coming toward them, grumbling and swearing in low tones but quite impressively.

Just then Tom Stacey opened the door of his room, and came out, clad as his father was, and with a revolver in his hand.

"What is the matter, Cousin Bramwell?" inquired Martha Gibbs, who spoke up as bold as a lion, no matter what her real feelings may have been.

"It is a very strange piece of business, Cousin Arabella, and I don't pretend to understand it. I was woke up by hearing a noise in my room, and saw somebody or something there. It was too dark for me to see what it was, and I reached for my pistol. Then the critter lighted out, and slammed the door."

"I heard the door slam," observed Eva.

"I hurried out to chase it, and caught a glimpse of something sliding down the stairway like a shadow. I ran there, and at the foot of the stairs was the queerest face, looking up and grinning at me, that I ever saw. I couldn't tell, for the life of me, whether it belonged to a human being or a wild animal. I fired a quick shot, but with a good chance to aim, and at the sound of the shot it was gone. I ran down, but saw nothing of it, and I can't imagine how it got away; but it was clean gone, and there was nothing to show for my shot."

"It must have been a cat," slyly suggested Eva.

"This was no cat. More like a dog, it seemed to me; but I don't know how a dog could have got into the house, much less how it could have come into my room and opened and shut the door."

"Whatever it is," said Tom, "it can't be far away, and the chances are that it is somewhere in the house. Let us look for it."

Two negro women who slept in the house had joined the others, and, as they were nearly frightened out of their wits by the pistol-shot and what they heard, they did not have a tranquilizing effect upon anybody.

A lamp was lighted, and Judge Stacey and Tom began their search for the strange intruder.

They were not cowards, whatever else they were, and their quest was careful and thorough.

After going through the cellar, they examined all the rooms on the first floor, but found no sign of any living thing anywhere.

There were windows without fastenings, through which an agile human being might have escaped; but nothing else could have got out in that way.

They had got through with that part of the house, and had just closed the door of the hindmost room, when they were startled by a barking at the front door.

It was a sharp and quick barking, like that of a dog which had been belated and wants to be let in.

They ran thither, and opened the door hastily; but there was no dog in sight, nor anything that could be mistaken for a dog.

"This is a queer piece of business," grumbled Judge Stacey. "I would give something to know what has been bothering us to-night."

"It must be about the place somewhere," insisted Tom, "and I am going to look for it."

We can't have Cousin Arabella and Cousin Eva worried by such goings on."

His father went with him, and they searched the grounds all around the house; but the night was very dark, and the lantern with which they had replaced their lamp illuminated but a small area.

So they found nothing, nor did any other suspicious circumstance attract their attention.

They returned to the house, locked the doors, told the waiting women of their search and of what they had failed to find, and declared that there was nothing left to do but to go to bed.

The two servant women had already settled it in their minds that the disturbing cause was "haunts," and they begged to be allowed to go to the negro quarters and pass the remainder of the night with their own people.

As their state of mind rendered them likely to be of more harm than use in the house, they were allowed to go, and the white people, after discussing various doubts and surmises, retired to their respective rooms.

Cousin Arabella and Eva did not go to sleep, as the mysterious occurrences had so far excited them that they could not close their eyes.

They sat up and talked until daylight, and therefore could claim the credit of being early risers.

At the breakfast table the disturbances of the night formed the only subject of conversation, though it was a sore subject for Judge Stacey, and he vainly tried to refrain from showing how much he was troubled by it.

"It must have been a human being or a phoe," said Tom; "for there was something very strange that happened in my room last night."

"What was that?" inquired Cousin Arabella. "I had a pint bottle of whisky there, out of which I took only a small nip when I went to bed, and after that I never went near it. In the morning about a third of it was gone."

This statement was received in solemn silence, as if it amounted to nothing as evidence.

The general opinion clearly was that Tom had taken a bigger "nightcap" than he said he had, or had got up in the night and helped himself unawares.

"I don't believe that ghosts drink whisky," said Judge Stacey; "but some human beings do, and you are one of them, Tom."

"Well, there is just one thing about it," said Cousin Arabella. "I would not for the world pass another night in a house where there are such goings on. My nervous system is all upset, and more of that sort of thing might be the death of me. I am sorry to leave you, Cousin Bramwell; but my business in New Orleans requires my attention, and I must go to the landing and take the first boat down the river."

This determination was a stunning blow to Judge Stacey and Tom, who vainly implored their wealthy relative to remain.

"Nothing of that sort ever happened in this house before," insisted the Judge, "and I don't believe it will ever occur again."

"It happened last night, and that is enough for me," replied Cousin Arabella. "I must say, too, that I hate to leave Cousin Eva when she is exposed to such annoyances. Suppose you let her go to New Orleans with me."

Much as Judge Stacey might have wished to oblige his valued cousin, this proposition was quite out of the question.

Eva was regarded as a bird in the hand, and as such she was better than any number of birds in the Kentucky bush.

Besides, the Kentucky contingent was about to take wing, and it must not be allowed to fly away with the bird in the hand.

So this proposition was kindly but firmly declined, the wishes of Eva of course not being consulted.

So Cousin Arabella, refusing the offer of Judge Stacey's conveyance and Tom's escort, got a team from Staceyville and was carried away to the landing, after promising to write to her relatives and to visit them again.

CHAPTER XIII.

"DECLARE WAR."

JAKE TOLLIVER reported to Flush Fred the morning after he was sent on his mission, and received his dollar.

His report was satisfactory to his employer, though he had little to relate outside of the fact that Tom Stacey got home late and very drunk.

He had picked up from the negroes about the place various items of more or less interest, showing that his work had thus far been done thoroughly, and he was requested to continue it.

The next morning his report contained more exciting matter.

"Dar was rats in dat house last night," said he.

"What do you mean, Jake?" demanded Henning.

"I played rats on ole scalawag Stacey an' de rest last night. I scart off de ole maid, too."

"What old maid?"

Jake told of the arrival of "Cousin Arabella" and the manner of her reception at the Stacey mansion.

"She's wort' two hunderd t'ousand dollars," he added, "an' dey was mighty glad to git holt o' her."

"How did you scare her off, Jake?"

"I played rats on 'em, as I tole yer. Last night I clumb up an' looked inter de gal's window, whar she was sleepin' wid de ole maid."

"What's that, Jake? Do you mean to say that you looked into the young lady's sleeping-room at night?"

"Cou'se I did. Didn't you tell me to keep a cluss watch onto her?"

"Yes, but not in that way. You must never do that again, or you and I will be out. You may worry the others as much as you please."

"I did dat, too. I gi'nd ole scalawag a good shakin' up, an' he shot off his pistil at me. Mebbe he hit my shadder. I didn't stop to look, as I was took wid a leavin' jest den."

"What was the matter with the old maid?"

"I worried her wid de rest, an' I listened at de window dis mornin' whar dey was eatin', an' heerd her say dat she wasn't goin' to stay no longer in a house whar dar was sech goin's on."

"Well, Jake, I don't know that I care about the old maid or what becomes of her. You may go on as you have been going, but keep away from the young lady's room at night. I can't stand that kind of spying."

Fred Henning and Ben Stanniford visited Miss Betty Marks, to swap news with her, and to receive the sympathy and advice which she always kept on tap.

She had of course received full intelligence of the duel, and had all the details of that bloodless encounter at her tongue's end.

Therefore, she warmly congratulated Flush Fred upon the happy (for him) termination of that affair, but warned him to be on his guard against the Staceys, who would doubtless seek to revenge themselves upon him for their humiliation.

"I mean to look out for myself right sharp," answered Henning, "and I fancy that they are afraid of me. That counts for something, you know."

"No doubt it does; but they will be likely to use some underhand means of worrying you. Eternal vigilance is the price of your existence among the Staceys."

"Then I will endeavor to be eternally vigilant. By the way, what has become of Miss Gibbs?"

"She is not far away."

"Has she left your house?"

"For the present. She is masquerading."

"That gives me no information."

"To tell you the truth, Fred, she has gone to Judge Stacey's for awhile."

"To Judge Stacey's?"

"Just that. She has gone there in a kind of disguise, to pass herself off as a rich cousin from Kentucky, to see how Eva is getting on, and to stay there and watch things if necessary."

"That must be the old maid, Ben," remarked Flush Fred.

"You may call Martha an old maid if you want to, but it is not a bit polite in you to do so," objected Betty Marks.

"I was speaking of the old maid cousin that my spy told me about, and he said that he had scared her off."

"Your spy? Have you been spying, too?"

"Yes, and as we seem to be in the same line of business, I will tell you about it."

Flush Fred gave a full account of his acquaintance with Jake Tolliver, and of that lad's investigations and operations at Judge Stacey's.

"Of course Martha was the old maid he spoke of," said Miss Marks, "but she was not scared off by any such performances. If she has left there, it was because there was nothing she could do for Eva at present, and I may expect her home shortly. You may be sure, Fred, that Martha Gibbs has not been frightened away. I judge from the fact of her leaving, as well as from your spy's account, that Eva is in fairly good health, and has nothing special to trouble her at present. Her trials have not yet begun."

"But they will begin," declared Fred.

"No doubt of that. They will begin soon enough for her, poor girl, and the bother is that we don't know when or in what shape they will come, so that we have no chance to guard against them."

"I shall keep a close watch on Judge Stacey's establishment."

"I am sure that you will; but it seems to me that we might do something else."

"What else?"

"In this uncertain state of affairs, perhaps we had better anticipate things, and declare war against the Staceys."

"I doubt if that would be advisable," replied Fred. "If there is to be war, we had better let them begin it, while we act on the defensive. There are too many of them, too. Stanniford and I would scarcely be able to stand up against a mob of Staceys, even if we had Charley Taintor and his friends to back us."

"But all the people of these parts are not Staceys, and men can be hired to help you. Money can do much, as you well know, and mine is freely at your service."

"Thank you."

"Oh, it is not for you that I make the offer."

You are acting for me in this matter, and of course I must be allowed to help you. I believe that I will enlist an army myself."

As the two young men walked back to Staceyville, Flush Fred was so unusually thoughtful and silent, that Ben Stanniford asked him what was the matter.

"Nothing at all," he answered. "I was only thinking."

"Of declaring war against the Staceys?"

"Not yet. I was thinking what a good-hearted, whole-souled woman Betty Marks is."

"I believe that she would go to any lengths to serve her friends. She is fond of you, too, Fred."

"Do you think so?"

"Anybody who has seen you two together must know that she is fond of you."

"I have fancied that she is. It is a pity that she is rich."

"I doubt if that is her opinion. Why is it a pity?"

"If she wasn't so confoundedly rich, I believe I would ask her to marry me."

"Her wealth ought not to be an objection. Most men would consider it an advantage."

"Do you suppose that I could be a pensioner upon any woman?"

"You need not be a pensioner."

"She would want me to give up what I have made my living at since I was a boy, and what else could I do?"

"There are lots of things that such a man as you can do."

"I am inclined to believe, Ben, that Miss Marks is a few years older than I am."

"The solid truth is, Fred Henning, that if you were really in love with her, no such objections as you have mentioned would ever occur to you."

"Perhaps so. I don't suppose that I am what you might call in love with Miss Marks, and I am sure that I would never try to swindle her into the belief that I am. I respect her too much for that."

There had been an arrival at Staceyville during the absence of the young men, and it was an arrival that was specially interesting to Ben Stanniford.

The new-comer was Andrew Bates, the Memphis capitalist and speculator.

On the Tom Swann he had declared his intention of visiting Staceyville, but Tom had not expected to see him there so soon.

After he had been warmly welcomed by Stanniford and his friend, he wanted to know what they had been doing there, and how Ben had been succeeding with his "venture."

He was taken up to the room which they occupied jointly, where everything of interest that had happened to them since their arrival was duly detailed to him.

"I don't see that you are getting on at all," said he. "It seems to me that you young fellows haven't got enough snap and vigor. Why don't you run off with the girl, Ben?"

"She don't want to be run off with."

"She ought to want it, and she will want it before long, I judge. Something has got to be done, anyhow, and I think you had better declare war against the Staceys."

"Just what Miss Marks said," observed Flush Fred.

"Who is Miss Marks?"

He was furnished with full information of the identity and characteristics of that lady.

"She is a very sensible woman," said he, "and I would be glad to make her acquaintance. Her idea of that matter is right, in my opinion, and I mean to see what I can do toward raising an army myself. It is merely a question of cash."

That evening Andrew Bates held various private consultations with Charley Taintor, and the landlord finally mounted a horse and rode away.

The next day Tom Stacey, who happened to be in Staceyville, and was reasonably sober, encountered Martha Gibbs, who had returned to Betty Marks's house, who was doing some shopping in the village.

She was not then wearing the spectacles that had partially disguised her; but Tom was quite sure that he knew her.

When his first surprise was over, he advanced and extended his hand.

"How'd'y do, Cousin Arabella? I am surprised to see you here. I thought you had gone down the river."

"Excuse me, sir, but you seem to have mistaken me for some other person," replied Miss Gibbs as she drew back rather haughtily.

"Is it possible? I would have been willing to swear that you are my cousin, Arabella Stacey, of Kentucky."

"Are you speaking of Miss Arabella Stacey, of Woodford county, Kentucky?"

"I am."

"A rich lady, who owns a big distillery there?"

"Just so."

"I know her well, or used to know her, though it is several years since I have met her. We were at school together, and were great friends, and I have often been mistaken for her. I could wish, if there was not a commandment

against covetousness, that I could be her, instead of being mistaken for her."

Tom went his way, greatly mystified. "I am decidedly of the opinion," said Martha Gibbs, when she related this incident to Betty Marks, "that the Staceys will now believe more strongly than ever in Cousin Arabella."

CHAPTER XIV.

WAR IS DECLARED.

WAR was declared shortly, but not by Fred Henning and his friends.

The Staceys were the aggressors, and they began as if they meant business.

The morning after the visit to Betty Marks and the arrival of Andrew Bates, Flush Fred had another report from Jake Tolliver of the occurrences at the Stacey mansion; but there was no news of special interest, and Jake was admonished to continue to watch closely the people up there.

During the day a number of men from the surrounding country came into Staceyville, and were in no hurry to go away.

They were mounted, of course, as was the custom of the country, and some had brought their rifles, while none were without a revolver.

Yet there was nothing like a hostile or organized array, as there did not seem to be any connection between them, though they were all on good terms with Charley Taintor, at whose hostelry they stopped.

Their explanation of their presence in Staceyville at that time was that they had come in for the purpose of "trading"—that is to say, of making purchases at the stores; but they did little "trading" outside of the bar of the hotel, and there they were reasonably abstemious.

These men, or most of them, passed the night at the hotel, and they did not by any means escape the observation of Flush Fred, who noticed them sharply and had his own opinion about them.

"Shouldn't wonder if these are our 'mercenaries,'" he remarked to Ben Stanniford.

"What do you mean?"

"Men who have been hired by Miss Marks or Andrew Bates for the war against the Staceys."

"Suppose I ask Mr. Bates if he knows anything about them."

"I don't think we need be inquisitive. If he chooses to tell us, he will do so. For my part, I am not worrying about the Staceys just now."

The next morning Jake Tolliver did not put in an appearance at the hotel with his regular report, and Flush Fred, after waiting for him beyond his usual hour, naturally wondered what had become of him.

Had he been playing pranks at Judge Stacey's house which had resulted in his being caught and held as a prisoner?

It was reasonable to suppose that something of the kind had occurred.

If so, would it be advisable to declare war against the Staceys on his account?

Flush Fred, standing alone in front of the hotel after breakfast and smoking the cigar of peace, saw ten or a dozen men coming down the street toward him, and recognized some of them as Staceys whom he had met on the dueling ground.

They were not in a bunch, but Colonel Jeff Stacey was at the head with two others, and the rest straggled on behind, as if they might have some business that connected them with Colonel Jeff.

This much was manifest to Fred Henning, and he could have no doubt that the purpose of the party was hostile to him individually; but he knew that he was well "heeled," and it was not in his nature to run away from a real danger, to say nothing of danger that was merely suspected.

As Colonel Jeff approached the young man, he produced a paper which had an official appearance.

"I believe your name is Henning," he remarked.

"I supposed that you knew me," mildly answered Fred. "I am sure that I have met you before. What is the matter now? Have you another friend who wants to challenge me?"

"I am not here, sah, to listen to any of your insolence. I have come on serious business. I have a warrant for your arrest."

What could this mean? Probably something connected with the duel. If so, it was a mean game for the Staceys to play, and Fred Henning was not the man to throw up his hand.

"You are my prisoner," said Colonel Jeff as he took a step toward the young man.

"Not yet," promptly replied Henning as he threw away his cigar. "You had better keep your distance, Colonel Stacey. I warn you that I am not to be trifled with."

"I have also a warrant for your partner, whose name I believe is Stanniford."

"Here he is, to answer for himself."

Ben Stanniford, who had heard the voices that were raised above the ordinary pitch, and had caught enough of the talk to understand what it meant, hurried out of the hotel and ranged himself at the side of his friend.

"Here we both are," said Flush Fred, "and I warn you again, Colonel Stacey, that we are

not to be trifled with. If you fancy that you are going to play a lone hand here, you are much mistaken. I have chipped in, and so has my friend. Now you may draw and make your bets."

"There is no foolishness about this thing," declared Colonel Jeff. "You had better surrender quietly, as I have force enough here to take you."

"You haven't got force enough in a whole generation of Staceys to take one pound of us. I am as ready to die right here as I was when I met your friend, the major."

Colonel Jeff looked around at his aids.

They had all come forward, and showed a threatening front, as they well might when there were but two men opposed to them.

"Arrest those men!" he ordered.

There was the beginning of a rush; but Flush Fred's revolver was leveled at the face of the foremost, and a pause followed.

"Stand back!" he shouted. "If a man of you moves another step, by the big State of Mississippi there will be somebody hurt!"

It must have been this novel and tremendous oath, quite as much as the sight of the revolver, that made them hesitate.

A tall and stalwart man, whose visible armament was a rifle, stepped out from the hotel bar, and planted himself at the side of Flush Fred.

"If thar's goin' to be a fight," he observed, "I want to be counted in."

"Me, too," said another.

"And me, too," said half a dozen more, as they filed out from the bar and took positions with what appeared to be the weaker party.

"What do you mean by this, Jim Maybie?" demanded Colonel Jeff, bristling up as he addressed the last speaker.

"I mean, Jeff Stacey, that the Staceys may run Staceyville, but they don't run the universe. They may own the earth as far as they can see, but they don't see as far as they think they do."

"Seems to me there was a warrant out for you, Jim Maybie, some time ago."

"So I've heard; and when you find somebody who wants to sarve it, jest let me know whar I can meet him. Bram'll Stacey's warrants ain't wuth shucks, so far as I'm concerned."

"And I want to say, Jeff Stacey," put in another of the men on that side, "that a stranger in these parts has got to have a fair show, and when you want to double-bank him, you'd better make sure that he hain't got no friends."

It was clear that Fred Henning had friends, or that there were friends of fair play then in Staceyville.

Charley Taintor had come out, though he did not appear to be inclined to take sides in the dispute, and other citizens of Staceyville were gathering there to see what was going on.

"Do you mean to say, Mr. Henning," demanded Colonel Jeff, "that you propose to resist the law?"

"I have not said anything of the kind," answered Fred. "I am ready to do the fair thing, if the fair thing is done to me. I am always ready to submit to the law; but I don't propose to be hornswaggled by a lot of bullyraggers in the name of the law."

"Meaning us?" inquired the colonel.

"Meaning you. I have had some experience of your ways lately, and know your style. You were not able to back me down, and now you are trying to work a scheme to tie me up. I want to know what the game is before the cards are dealt. Tell me plainly what you mean, and I will tell you what I will do."

"As I told you, I have a warrant for your arrest."

"Who issued that warrant?"

"Judge Bramwell Stacey."

"So I thought. As he's a personal enemy of mine, he might have had the decency to get somebody else to issue it, and then his malice would not have been so clear. Are you an officer of his court, if he has a court?"

"I have been deputized by him to serve this warrant."

"That's a fine scheme. A personal enemy of mine and of Mr. Stanniford's issues a warrant for our arrest, and sends another personal enemy to serve it, and we are expected to deliver ourselves up into the hands of our enemies. It seems that we are suspected of being fools. Now, sir, I want to know what the crime is that we are accused of."

"It is a serious matter, I can tell you. You are charged with the abduction of Judge Stacey's niece and ward, Miss Eva Bramwell."

"Abduction!" exclaimed Flush Fred, who was thoroughly startled by the word.

"Abduction! That is the last thing I would have thought of. What kind of a game is this?"

Ben Stanniford was equally surprised and horrified.

"Do you mean to tell us," he demanded, "that Miss Bramwell has been forcibly taken away from her uncle's house?"

"That is the fact," answered Colonel Jeff, "and nobody knows it better than you and your partner, who were seen at the house last night, shortly before she disappeared."

"That is a lie!" shouted Fred Henning, his wrath for the moment getting the better of his discretion. "It is a mean, sneaking, cowardly lie. If there were ten thousand Staceys here for me to face, I would brand it as a lie."

That was pretty rough talk for Colonel Jeff Stacey to hear; but the odds in his favor were not sufficient just then to allow him to risk a collision with the opposite party, and he need not take the lie to himself.

"That don't touch me," he said. "The statement was made by eye-witnesses, not by me. You talk big, young man, but we will see how you can prove your words when you come to your trial."

"Why, my friend and I can prove that we passed the night here in Charley Taintor's house, and that we were not outside of Staceyville."

"An alibi!" sneered Jeff Stacey. "That is the usual resource of questionable characters. Come on, then, and prove your alibi. Will you go with me peaceably, or shall I have to use force?"

"We will not go with you," calmly answered Flush Fred. "You must see that this is not as one-sided a game as you thought it was. It is our play now, and for a trump we lead No!"

CHAPTER XV.

BAFFLED, BUT NOT BEATEN.

COLONEL JEFF STACEY looked at his own men and at those who were opposed to him.

His people were not outnumbered; but the others were calm and resolute, and he saw among them some whom he recognized as having grudges against one Stacey or another, and it was apparent that they were willing to take advantage of the present opportunity to work out their grudges.

A collision, as the affair then stood, meant bloodshed, and he was not prepared to push his errand to that extremity.

There was one plan that ought to serve him, and to that he had recourse.

The Staceys were supposed to be all-powerful in Staceyville, and he appeared among the people there as one clothed with authority.

He lifted up his voice, and appealed to the citizens, who by that time had collected in a considerable crowd.

"In the name of the law I call upon all good citizens to help me arrest those two men!"

No man stirred.

It was none of their fight, and for the time, at least, there was no magic in the presence of a Stacey or in the name of the law.

Still the Staceyites faced the Independents, as the friends of Fred Henning and Ben Stanniford may be called, and neither side made a move.

Jeff Stacey was in a quandary.

It was clear that he must fight or back down; but he was not authorized to proceed to the extremity of open war, and it may be added that, as a family man, he was unwilling to risk his precious life.

Yet another backdown would be another boast for the enemy.

If he had ordered his force to seize Flush Fred as soon as they came in sight of him, perhaps they might have captured him; but perhaps they might not have got away with him.

He had one resource left and proceeded to try it.

"I give you all fair warning," he cried, "that those who resist the law, or interfere with the officers of the law, are liable to punishment. Every man who assists these two men in defying arrest will be marked and made to suffer."

The jeers of the other side proved that they were not frightened by that threatening speech; but Flush Fred's blood was up, and he took the management of his affairs into his own hands.

"No man shall get into trouble on my account," he declared, and he turned and spoke to the men who were siding with him.

"My friends, if you are my friends, you could not please me better than by dropping out of this. I don't suppose that any of you are afraid of getting into trouble; but I prefer to run this thing myself, and so I beg you to stand aside. You, too, Ben Stanniford. I don't want you to interfere with me."

As he seemed to be thoroughly in earnest, Jim Maybie and the others moved away from him, and even Ben Stanniford stood aside.

They were still there, however, and their presence was an embarrassment to Jeff Stacey and his party.

"Here I am now," cried Flush Fred, whose anger had for the moment overcome his discretion.

"Here I am, alone, and if you think you can take me under that swindling warrant, come and take me. But I warn you that the first move you make will be the death warrant of Colonel Stacey."

As this statement was emphasized by a leveled revolver, and as Colonel Stacey was in no hurry for his death warrant, he stepped back and took a position in the rear of his friends.

"Are you sneaking off?" shouted Henning. "Come on, then, the rest of you, if there are

any more candidates for the Stacey graveyard!"

There was a moment of hesitation among the Staceys, owing to the backward disposition of their leader.

Jim Maybie stepped forward briskly, followed by those who had previously followed him, and they placed themselves in front of Flush Fred.

"This won't begin to do," Maybie declared. "If thar's goin' to be fightin', I want to be counted in. If thar's to be bloodsheddin', I want a chance to let out some gore."

"I reckon you had all better keep the peace," remarked Charley Taintor. "If you don't, I may be tempted to take a hand in the game, myself."

"Those men are defying the law," insisted Jeff Stacey.

"It is not to be expected," said Fred Henning, "that my partner and I will deliver ourselves into the hands of those whom we know to be our enemies; but I will tell you what we are willing to do. We will give the law, or what you call the law, as fair a show as it can ask for. Bring here the man who issued that warrant, or any sort of a magistrate, and we will give bail to meet the charge at any time and place."

"That is nothing but talk," answered the colonel. "Everybody knows that neither Judge Stacey nor any other judge would condescend to enter into such an arrangement. The question is whether you will obey the law and submit to arrest under this warrant?"

"They won't do it if they've got sense," put in Jim Maybie. "Bramwell Stacey's warrants ain't wuth shucks."

"We will not go with you, and that is settled," was Flush Fred's decision. "I have made you a fair offer, and if you won't accept it, you may do your best or your worst."

It was not Colonel Stacey's cue to use force at that time in executing the warrant he held, especially as his party might be overpowered in a street contest.

If he had "chipped in" as soon as he encountered the common enemy of the Staceys, he might have played a trump card and taken the trick; but he had let that chance go by.

Therefore he accepted the situation, though with an ill grace.

"This is a riot!" he shouted. "It is a rebellion against the constituted authorities. I shan't push this thing now; but I give you fair warning that all who uphold that man, and protect him from a legal arrest, will be dealt with by the law."

"Hold on a bit!" ordered Fred Henning, as Colonel Jeff turned away. "There may be nothing more to be done in this business, but there is something to be said. You tell me that Mr. Stanniford and I are charged with the abduction of a young lady whom we have never seen within the State of Mississippi. Now, sir, I want to know if it is a fact that the young lady you name has disappeared from Bramwell Stacey's house."

"Yes, she has disappeared," coldly answered Colonel Jeff, "and nobody knows it better than you."

"It is not worth while for me to brand that lie and keep on branding it. I want to say that if you are telling me the truth now—if the young lady has really disappeared—there has been foul play on the part of you Staceys."

"What do you mean by that, sah?"

"I mean that Bramwell Stacey and his son, or some of the rest of you, are responsible for her disappearance. As for my friend and myself, we can easily prove that we were not outside of Staceyville."

As a matter of fact, it would have been a difficult matter for Fred Henning to prove his assertion, easily as he made it, and truthful as he knew it to be.

Of course he could prove that he and Stanniford had gone to bed at the hotel as usual, and that they had shown up in the morning as usual; but they might have slipped out during the night, and gone rampaging about, doing any amount of mischief, and nobody the wiser for it.

"An alibi, of course," sneered Colonel Jeff.

"You may call it what you please. Hard words can't hurt the truth. If that young lady has really disappeared, there has been foul play, and we mean to get at the bottom of it, no matter how deep or how muddy it is and a thousand Staceys could never back us down or balk us."

"You are the kind of a chief that the Indians would call Wind-in-the-Mouth," retorted Colonel Stacey. "The fact is, young man, that if you don't skip out of here mighty soon, which is the thing you are most likely to do, you will blow your horn and pursue your investigations in the cool recesses of the county jail."

After this parting shot, Colonel Jeff Stacey walked away, and his party dispersed in different directions, leaving Flush Fred and the Independents masters of the field so far.

CHAPTER XVI.

PREPARING FOR WAR.

So far, it is true, they were masters of the field; but how long would they remain so?

Jeff Stacey had declared that it must be either

a retreat or a defeat for them, and the Staceys were powerful in that region.

It would be necessary not only to maintain their position, but to advance upon the enemy, and that was a heavy contract, looking as if it might mean a pretty big war.

Henning and Stanniford had a consultation with Andrew Bates, at which Charley Taintor and Jim Maybie were present and assisting.

Poor Ben was greatly worried about the spiriting away of Eva Bramwell, and declared that he could not get at the reason of the move.

"You are so badly bothered, my poor boy," observed Flush Fred, "that you can't see clearly. It is plain to me that they have carried her off, and for two reasons. First, because they want to get her out of our way, or out of your way, and second, because they want to get us into a hobble by bringing this accusation against us and tying us up under it."

"What can they have done with her?" demanded Ben.

"That is what we must find out. That some deviltry has been going on about Bramwell Stacey's place is certain, as my spy has also disappeared."

"What spy is that?" inquired Andrew Bates.

Flush Fred told of his acquaintance with Jake Tolliver, and of that young Arab's operations up to date.

"He was to have reported to me again this morning," continued Fred, "but he failed to show up, and I judged that he must have been captured by the enemy. It now seems likely that this affair of Miss Bramwell's has led to his capture or disappearance, as I am sure that he would have reported to me if he had not been prevented by circumstances beyond his control."

"We must find her," insisted Ben Stanniford. "Whatever else we may think of doing, that is the first thing that needs to be done."

"I am quite of your opinion, Ben, but it is hard to say how we are to go to work to do it. If we could get hold of Jake Tolliver, I think he would tell us how the matter really stands, and then we would know how to act; but he has also mysteriously disappeared, and so we are forced to move more or less in the dark."

"It is my notion," remarked Jim Maybie, "that you'll have as much as you keer to do for a while to look arter yourselves. When those Staceys git thar blood up, they are mighty apt to make things b'le."

"That's so," chimed in Charley Taintor. "They will be likely to hunt you, Mr. Henning, before you can hunt them or anybody else. It won't be safe for you or Mr. Stanniford to stir outside of Staceyville yet awhile, as they would be pretty sure to pounce on you."

"So you really think there is going to be war," observed Fred. "Well, then, in the language of the immortal Patrick Henry, let it come! I am ready, for one, to make Rome howl!"

"What we need," said Andrew Bates, "is a little less talk and a good deal more action. It seems to me that this affair, like all other wars, is largely a question of cash. The longest purse stands a good chance to win against odds. You are backed by my purse, and, as I understand, by that of Miss Marks. More recruits are wanted, and they must be had if cash can procure them. Mr. Taintor, you and Mr. Maybie may take this matter in hand, if you will, and I assure you most positively that money is no object. Set as many recruiting-officers at work as you please, and give them to understand that the point is to get the men, and to have them here as soon as possible."

This was business talk, plain and to the point, and it was evident that the Memphis capitalist meant business.

Taintor and Maybie, who had reason to know that there was a solid backing to his promises, set out at once to carry his instructions into effect.

Then ensued a period of comparative quiet, but of active and really ominous preparation.

A heavy war-cloud settled over Staceyville, rendering the atmosphere close and oppressive.

The citizens of the village, most of whom had seen and heard what had transpired, speedily got a good idea of what might be expected, and the effect was that suppressed excitement prevailed everywhere among them.

Business—if the small and slow trading of Staceyville could be called business—was nearly at a standstill.

Some of the inhabitants were persuaded to take the side of the strangers and their friends, while others seriously considered the propriety of closing their establishments or shutting themselves up in their houses.

Andrew Bates entered into the affair with the greatest imaginable alacrity and energy, showing rare qualities of generalship.

With the assistance of Charley Taintor, he organized the force as it was recruited, prepared a quantity of boxes and barrels to be used as a street barricade in case of necessity, posted sentries as in war-time, and sent out scouts to ascertain what the Staceys were doing and intending to do.

Thus he took the entire direction out of the

hands of Fred Henning, though Fred was given to understand that in the event of an actual battle, he would be expected to take command of the troops.

These preparations naturally made the people of Staceyville nervous and uneasy, producing the condition of suppressed excitement that has been alluded to.

They were hardly more restless and uneasy than Fred Henning and Ben Stanniford, both of whom were extremely anxious to get out of town and begin the search for Eva Bramwell.

Ben, indeed, was half crazy on that point, and he would have broken away and gone off on his own account, if he had not been watched and restrained by his friends.

While they were waiting, grumbling at the inactivity to which they appeared to be condemned, there came the clattering of hoofs down the one street of Staceyville, and Betty Marks rode furiously into town, accompanied by one of her servants.

She halted in front of the hotel, and called eagerly for Mr. Henning and Mr. Stanniford, who hastened together to meet her.

"What is all this that is going on here?" she demanded.

"It is war," answered Flush Fred. "War has been declared, and we are expecting it to begin at any hour or moment."

"I was looking for something of the kind; but that is not all. I am told that Eva Bramwell has disappeared from her uncle's house, and that you two are accused of having abducted her."

"So the Staceys tell us, and it is true that they do make that accusation. If she has really disappeared, they must have spirited her away."

"No doubt of that; but she must be found."

"Ben and I are wild to go out and hunt her; but we are not allowed to leave Staceyville as matters now stand."

"Then you are expecting a fight right here?" inquired Miss Marks.

"That is what our friends are expecting, anyhow, and they tell us that we must put ourselves in their hands, unless we want to fall into the hands of our enemies. You had better ride back home, my dear friend and partner, as there is danger in the air about here."

"I think I can take care of myself; but I will go. I have told Mr. Taintor to use my money freely in this business, and you must not let him spare it. Take care of yourself, Fred Henning, for you are too good a man to be wasted here. I have one piece of advice to give you."

"What is that?"

"You had better catch a Stacey!"

"I would not object to catching a Stacey. But, if we should catch a Stacey, what are we to do with him?"

"Squeeze the truth out of him."

"About Miss Bramwell? That is not a bit of a bad idea."

"Go to work on it, then. Good-by, now, and take care of yourselves, both of you, for Eva's sake and for mine."

CHAPTER XVII.

"TO ARMS! THE FOE! THEY COME!"

THE two young men went back into the hotel, where they were joined by Andrew Bates.

That gentleman was somewhat fatigued by his recent unusual exertions; but the light of battle was in his eye, and he was evidently laboring under strong excitement, which he vainly sought to suppress.

"I shall really have to take a drink," said he, "as I seem to be getting nervous. If you gentlemen will join me, I will order the fluids."

"You seem to have been hard at work," observed Flush Fred, when he and Ben had assented to the order.

"So I have been, and it was exciting work, I must admit. But I think we have got matters pretty well straightened out now, and that we will be able to give it to the Staceys hot and heavy. If they want war, they will be likely to get all they want."

The three men absorbed their fluids, each thinking his own thoughts.

Then Flush Fred, on whose mind some points had been pressing, opened a fresh branch of inquiry.

"There are two things connected with this business that have been puzzling me, Mr. Bates," said he, "and I think you can explain them if you will. One of the points I am sure you can explain."

"Just tell me what they are," answered the gentleman from Memphis, "and I will at least promise to tell you the truth. There is precious little secrecy about me."

"I can't understand, Mr. Bates, why Judge Stacey, as he calls himself, is so very anxious to retain possession of that pretty niece of his, that he is willing to go to war for her, or to make war upon people whom he suspects of a wish to take her away from him."

"Why, that is plain enough. He wants to marry her to his son."

"But why should he be so keen to marry her to his son?"

"Simply because Bramwell Stacey is in such a bad hole, financially, that it is impossible for

him to crawl out of it unless he can get hold of his niece's money. She has quite a comfortable fortune of her own, I understand, of which he has charge as her guardian, and he needs that money very badly."

"Why don't he steal it?" inquired Henning. "That would be no worse, it seems to me, than what he is trying to do."

"Legally, it would be much worse, and the marriage plan is easier and less dangerous. Even Bramwell Stacey, here in Staceyville, with his own people and courts to protect him, would hardly dare to commit such a flagrant robbery. Besides, I've an idea that Miss Bramwell's property is guarded in some way. He and his son are of course in the same boat, and they must do something to save themselves."

"Thank you, Mr. Bates. Now I would like to know, if it is not an impertinence on my part to ask the question, why it is that you, who seem to have no personal interest in this matter, are willing to exert yourself in it so actively, spending your money freely, and even putting yourself in the attitude of defying the laws."

"I am a friend of Ben Stanniford's," answered the banker.

"So am I, and we are in the same boat there."

"I suppose that I have quite as strong a friendly interest in Ben as you have, Mr. Henning, as I am fond of him for his mother's sake. As you are ready to risk your life for him, it is not surprising that I should be willing to risk a little money, which is all I have done so far."

"That is quite natural," replied Fred, "though I must confess that I had not looked at the matter in that light. I had thought, though it may seem mean to say so after what I have heard, that you might have some kind of a business interest in the affair."

Mr. Bates smiled pleasantly.

"As I am known to be above all things a business man," said he, "it was natural that you should have such a thought, and I may as well admit that you are not far out of the way. Yes, Mr. Henning, I have a personal and business interest in this difficulty, strong enough of itself to justify me in all I have done, and in much more. The fact is that I have claims against more than one Stacey, and particularly against Bramwell Stacey. With my best efforts I have been unable to secure the payment of my claims, or any sort of a settlement. If I resort to the law, they control the courts and the juries. They are not willing to pay, and they can't be made to pay. That is a strange state of things in such a country as this; but I have good reason to know that it exists here."

"Then the Staceys do own the earth," suggested Ben Stanniford.

"A good portion of it in this region, and they regard mortgages as no better than waste paper. Seldom has a Stacey moved away, and they have increased and multiplied until they rule the county, parcel out the offices among themselves, and will scarcely permit any person who is not a Stacey to live. When I was down here among them, trying in vain to straighten out my business here, I discovered that there were many people who hated the Staceys, or who had a grudge against them which they had not been able to work out, and that there might be a strong opposition to them if it could be organized and encouraged. So I must admit that I am glad of the chance to help start a rebellion against them. I want to see the power of the Staceys broken."

"It is a good thing for us, or at least for Ben, that you have that business interest," remarked Flush Fred. "But it seems to me that we have a pretty heavy contract before us."

Loud voices were heard outside, and there was a commotion in the house, and a messenger ran in to meet the four men as they were starting to see what was the matter.

"They're comin'!" he exclaimed. "A big crowd of Staceys are comin', and it looks as if they mean to take the town."

"To arms! The foe! They come! They come!" cried Flush Fred, quoting Byron, his favorite poet.

Followed by the others, he hastened forth to the fray.

It was true that the Staceys were coming in force and in a style which surely meant serious business.

There had been, in fact, a general gathering of Staceys in accordance with a previous arrangement.

They had already received notices to the effect that their services might be required, sent by Bramwell Stacey, the acknowledged chief of the clan, and they came from all quarters, like tribesmen or feudal retainers.

From the Ridge Road they came, where a colony of Staceys was strung along for a considerable distance; from the Staghead Hills at the east, where "poor but honest" Staceys grubbed for a living; from the fat and fertile bottom-lands of the Issaquena, where thrifty Staceys grew long staple cotton; from the country about Staceyville, which was dotted with the habitations of Staceys; to say nothing of the Staceys of the village, who had gone off with Colonel Jeff after his repulse.

Mounted and armed they came at the com-

mand of Judge Stacey, who believed himself invincible when he gazed upon this imposing array.

This news was brought in by the scouts, who also reported that the Staceys were approaching the village in two bodies and from opposite directions, their intention doubtless being to hem in the common enemy and prevent an escape.

It may be stated here that Flush Fred and his friends had no idea of using Charley Taintor's house as a castle or a fort, thus incurring its damage, if not its destruction.

Though the landlord's friendship for his recent guests was known to the Staceys, and might be expected to operate as a bill of attainder against him under their rule, his new friends were determined not to make the matter any worse for him than they could help.

If there was to be a battle, therefore, the street must be the battle-ground.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A BATTLE IN A STREET.

THE separate troops of Staceys each halted a short distance outside of the village, for the purpose of dismounting and hitching their horses out of danger.

They were willing to risk their lives for the common honor and profit of the Staceys; but horseflesh and "niggers" cost money, and were not to be rashly ventured.

This delay, coupled with the alacrity of the scouts in bringing the news of the approach of the enemy, gave the Independents a fair chance to complete their preparations for the conflict.

In fact, not much time was needed, as it was only necessary to carry out the arrangements previously and carefully made by Andrew Bates and Charley Taintor.

Barrels and boxes, that had been prepared for the purpose, were rolled and tumbled out, and in a little while there was completed in front of the hotel a double row of barricades, reaching across the village street, effectually blocking it up, and defending the approach in either direction.

The hotel, with which these defenses communicated, was to serve as a base of supplies; but nobody supposed that it would be a point of attack.

When Flush Fred sallied forth from the hotel with his friends, he was surprised to see the number of men who had been gathered to the fray by the exertions of Andrew Bates and Charley Taintor and Jim Maybie.

The alarm just given had started them up, and they came from all quarters to the scene of action, stragglers dropping in up to the time of the completion of the defenses.

They were men of good quality, too, for such a purpose, and they seemed to be thoroughly in earnest, with a clear comprehension of the issue and a strong determination to "put the thing through."

It was evident that they were no mere mercenaries, though they might have enlisted for pay; but many of them were actuated by a definite hatred of the Staceys and a desire to end the domination of the ruling dynasty.

When Jim Maybie looked about upon this body of men, he was jubilant with hope.

"We'll settle 'em now!" he cried, in cheerful anticipation of the event. "We will give the Staceys such a shakin' up as they never had afore, one that'll make 'em sing small forever after, amen!"

There was no doubt that a real rebellion had been started, and Jim Maybie ought to be as good a prophet as anybody to predict the result; but with him the wish might be father to the thought.

When the Staceys came in sight, and Flush Fred perceived their numbers and their evident organization, not even Jim Maybie could inspire him with confidence in the issue of the event.

It was then near the close of the afternoon, but lacked fully two hours of sundown, and there was plenty of time for a very lively fight before night.

The Staceys came, as the scouts had reported they would, in two bodies, one led by Judge Bramwell Stacey, and the other by Colonel Jeff Stacey, and they presented an imposing and formidable appearance as they marched into the village—so formidable, indeed, that some of the Independents were clearly inclined to be shaky.

Andrew Bates, though he did not propose to be a combatant, could be useful in other ways, and he went about among the men, encouraging and inciting them.

"This is a great opening for every man of you," said he. "The question is to be settled now whether anybody besides the Staceys is to have a living chance in this county."

"If we can't have that," put in Jim Maybie, "we had better die right here, and the only way to git it is to fight for it."

Each column of the Staceys halted just out of gunshot of the barricades, which gave them a pretty clear perception of the magnitude of the task before them and the difficulties that were to be overcome.

Colonel Jeff Stacey advanced alone, until he

was ordered to halt and declare his purpose, when he was within a couple of rods of the eastern barricade.

"I want two men," he said, "two men named Henning and Stanniford. As some of you know, I have a warrant for those men, legally issued, and put in my hands for services. If they will submit to arrest, and go with me peaceably, all will be well. If not, there'll be Satan raised here in Staceyville."

"Go ahead and raise it, then!" roared Jim Maybie, whose excitable nature would not allow him to keep quiet.

"Go ahead and raise it! Raise all you can! That's what we are here for, and we mean to send you Staceys higher'n a kite afore we git through with you."

"I want to know," resumed Colonel Jeff, without noticing this fiery speaker, "whether those two men will come out and submit to arrest."

"We will not," answered Fred Henning, "and you know the reason why. We refuse to put ourselves in the hands of our enemies. That point was settled this morning."

"Then I warn you and all who are concerned with you in this business, that if you defy the law and resist this posse that has been sent to enforce the law, you will suffer for it, each and every one of you. Last call, now—are you going to surrender? One, two, three—"

"Goin', goin', git out!" yelled Jim Maybie, and Colonel Jeff turned and walked back to his party.

"I'd ha' been glad to put a bullet in him," remarked Maybie. "He's one of the wu'st of the lot, is Colonel Jeff—one of the meanest and most cantankerous; but thar ain't a bit o' skeer in him, and that's to his credit."

Then the racket began.

A shot was fired as a signal, and both battalions of the banded Staceys swooped down upon the barricades from the east and the west.

They advanced in skirmishing style, keeping up such a rapid and well directed fire that the defenders did not dare to show their heads; but there were openings here and there between the barrels and boxes, through which they were able to return the fire with effect.

It was a terrible scene to occur in a civilized country, in a State where law was supposed to prevail, and in a community that had hitherto been comparatively peaceful.

In fact, it amounted to civil war on a small scale, and the prospect was that it would be a war to the death.

After keeping up this rattling and dangerous fire for a few minutes, the two bands of Staceyites raised a yell and made a rush for the barricades.

Then the fighting was close and severe.

Rifles were thrown aside, except where they were used as clubs, and pistols and knives were brought into play, and hand-to-hand encounters were frequent and deadly.

Flush Fred Henning actually rejoiced in the conflict, which excited him to the highest pitch, and he seemed to be everywhere, encouraging his comrades by his words and his example, while his revolver cracked whenever he could make his shots tell.

Ben Stanniford showed first-rate qualities as a fighter, and, in fact, the fighting blood of all the Independents was fairly up.

Jim Maybie raged and swore, and dashed at the swarming Staceyites as if the one ambition of his life had been attained in meeting them there face to face.

Charley Taintor, who had been implored by his guests to keep out of the fight, and who had promised to do so, got excited, and rushed into it as wild-eyed as any of the rest.

Even Andrew Bates, who was supposed to be unwilling to risk anything but his money, dashed out of the hotel, drew a revolver, and surprised everybody by the coolness and skill with which he used it.

It was a bitter and bloody battle, and was not soon over.

The attacking parties, in order to reach their adversaries, were compelled to climb over the boxes and barrels, or to get them out of the way, and this gave the insiders an advantage of which they availed themselves to the fullest extent.

Nor did the fact that the attack was made from opposite directions trouble those behind the barricades, as that had been expected, and men had been assigned to each line of the defenses.

The result was that the Staceyites, baffled and terribly hurt, recoiled from the attack, and finally withdrew to their former positions.

They were allowed to carry off their wounded without asking permission to do so, and the injured on the other side were taken into the hotel where they were well cared for.

The first battle of the campaign, or the first stage of the battle, had been very much in earnest, and therefore severely destructive.

Several men had been killed, and quite a number had been wounded, the Independents suffering as well as the Staceyites, though not near so heavily.

There would be weeping and wailing along the

Issaquena, out on the Ridge Road, among the Staghead Hills, and in various homesteads near Staceyville.

Both sides were glad to take a rest, and the Independents improved the opportunity to rearrange and strengthen their defenses.

CHAPTER XIX.

A GOOD PLAN SPOILED.

FLUSH FRED did not suppose, nor did any of his friends suppose, that the Staceys, though badly hurt, would have the least idea of abandoning the struggle.

They knew, as well as the Independents did, that this was no mere contest over a single point or a single person, but an organized rebellion against their rule.

Spies had been out on their side, as well as on the other side, and news was carried so quickly from one locality to another, that they could not fail to have a good idea of what was going on, and they knew that among the men who had gone to Staceyville to join the Independents, were several who had bitter grudges against the Staceys, and who had been longing for a chance to strike them down.

The family had been so long intrenched in power, almost absolute in the locality, with the rest of mankind under their feet, that they were willing to fight to the death, rather than give up the position they had gained.

They must be first or nowhere; it was everything or nothing with them.

Judge Stacey also knew that Andrew Bates was in the village, actively engaged in forwarding the revolt, and that was to him a matter of the closest personal importance.

If the rebellion should succeed, and the power of the Staceys should be broken, his estates would surely be swept away, and his fortunes would be irretrievably ruined.

The rebellion must be put down, and the Memphis capitalist must be foiled, or more than one Stacey would suffer severely.

After all, the Staceyville war was not such a very wonderful affair—not more so than a fight between two neighbors over the question of a disputed line fence.

It was pretty much the same sort of an affair, but on a larger scale.

The same may be said, indeed, concerning most of the wars in which nations engage.

The Staceyites were so far from abandoning the contest that they had just hit upon a plan which they believed would give them a great advantage over their enemies, and perhaps enable them to end the campaign at a blow.

Across the street from the hotel, and at the other end of the barricaded space, was a small two-story house, which was occupied by a shoemaker.

This shoemaker, who happened to be a strong Staceyite, had closed his doors and shutters when a collision in the street was believed to be imminent, and had taken his family out of harm's way.

As the shoemaker's house was decidedly a strategic point, the Independents ought to have occupied and held it; but they had no men to man it for that purpose, and they could only hope that it would be overlooked by the enemy.

Fortunately they had been overlooked until after the bloody repulse of the Staceyites.

Then it occurred to Colonel Jeff, who was as angry as a bear with a sore head, that it would be a good thing to throw a party into the shoemaker's house, strike his adversaries on the flank, and fire down upon them from a better fortification than they had.

If he had got hold of that idea sooner, and had gone to work on it, striking the Independents from that quarter when the two bands of Staceyites charged the barricades, there can scarcely be a doubt that he would have defeated and scattered them.

It might not be too late to play that game, and he determined to make the attempt while daylight lasted.

After ascertaining that the house was as yet unoccupied, he sent a party of men by a detour to its rear to take possession of it.

He sent just enough to hold it and fire from its cover without crowding, and Tom Stacey was the leader of the party.

Then he sent a messenger around to Judge Stacey to inform him of what had been done and was intended, and to request him to charge the barricade again at a signal that was mentioned to him.

It was a very good plan, and would have been much better if it had been adopted sooner; but, like many other well-made plans, it had a leak in it.

Tom Stacey was reasonably sober when he came to Staceyville with the others; but he got excited after the first engagement, and proceeded to console himself for the repulse by going around the corner of a house and helping himself freely to the contents of a flask which he had been thoughtful enough to bring with him.

When he got into the shoemaker's house with his party, he again applied himself to the flask, and the result was that he became bumptious

and quarrelsome, quite unfitted to command even a small detachment.

One of the men, perceiving his condition, and being thoroughly disgusted with it, took occasion to tell him that he was drunk.

"You are a liar," retorted Tom. "I am no more drunk than you are."

A scuffle ensued, and it occurred at a bad time and place, the place being the upper story of the shoemaker's house, from which position the party were to operate upon the enemy's flank.

In the scuffle Tom Stacey was flung against the front window, breaking the glass, and forcing the hasp of the shutter, which flew open.

At the same time his revolver dropped on the floor, and one of the chambers was discharged.

No more unfortunate mishap could have occurred; but the damage was done before the rest of the party could interfere to prevent it.

Fred Henning's quick senses had noted the shot and the flying open of the shutter, and he at once guessed what was going on in there.

He also perceived at once how disastrous must be the possession of that point by the enemy, and his decision and action were instantaneous.

"Quick, here!" he cried. "I want half a dozen good men for sharp work. The Staceys have occupied that house, and they will give us handins unless they are driven out. Six good men for the work, now, and there's not a minute to be lost!"

Six men were immediately forthcoming, and Ben Stanniford was one of them, and fiery Jim Maybie was the leader.

Their orders were brief and to the purpose—to clear the enemy out of that house, and be quick about it.

The Staceyites in the house had scarcely recovered from the dismay caused by Tom Stacey's mishap, when the front door was burst open, and the Independents came rushing up the stairs.

Then ensued a furious and desperate hand-to-hand conflict.

Pistols and knives were set at work in the hands of vigorous and excited men, and the upper floor of the small house resounded with shots and shouts and all the noises of a struggle for life in a narrow space.

It was hot and heavy while it lasted, sharper and more severe in its way than the first battle of the barricades; but it was soon over.

The unexpected onslaught and fierce impetuosity of the Independents soon put them in possession of the house, and those of the Staceyites who could escape by way of the doors or windows hastened to do so.

Jim Maybie was the hero of the occasion, as he was worth any three men of either side in the skirmish; but he was ably seconded by his comrades.

Ben Stanniford ran against Tom Stacey, and there was a combat between the two rivals—if Tom might be called a rival—which was as brief as it was interesting.

Ben had exhausted the cartridges in his revolver, and Tom had not recovered the weapon which he had dropped.

So they rushed together and clinched.

Tom Stacey was a larger and heavier man than his antagonist; but his flabby muscles and frame enfeebled by alcohol were no match for the trained athletic strength and skill of Ben Stanniford.

As for "wind," an all-important element in such a struggle, his supply of that necessary article ran short very speedily.

When he began to gasp, his muscular and active adversary forced him to one of the rear windows, pitched up his heels, and unceremoniously tumbled him out.

He fell on the back of one of his comrades who had escaped down-stairs, and they rolled over together.

As soon as possible they picked themselves up and limped away, cursing the enemy and each other.

In the mean time exciting events were occurring in the street.

Colonel Jeff Stacey, whose instructions to Tom's party had been that they should keep quiet until he renewed the action, knew nothing of what was going on in the shoemaker's house until the shooting informed him that something was the matter there.

When he ran in that direction and saw one of his men jumping out of a rear window, he easily guessed that they had been discovered by the enemy, had been attacked, and were getting the worst of it.

As it was then too late to send them reinforcements, there was only one way to help them, and that was to carry out his original plan, making a diversion in their favor by an attack on the barricade.

He immediately gave the signal, and valorously charged the breastwork of boxes and barrels.

Just then happened another piece of ill-fortune which harmed the Staceyites considerably, while it proportionately helped their adversaries.

The signal was misunderstood, or was mistaken for a shot in the shoemaker's house, by Judge Stacey's party, whose attention was di-

rected that way, and who were naturally wondering what was going on there.

Consequently the plan was spoiled in all its parts, as the two bodies of Staceyites failed to advance together, and Colonel Jeff's charge had spent its force and suffered a repulse before those on the other side had found out what was the matter, and had fairly begun to move.

Thus the Independents were able to concentrate their force upon one body of their opponents at a time, which was a vast advantage to them.

Their friends from the shoemaker's house hastened to join them, and one band after another of the Staceyites was met and driven back disastrously.

CHAPTER XX.

CATCHING A STACEY.

THE misfortunes of the Staceys at the shoemaker's house and in the second engagement in the street, were of course the fault of Tom Stacey, and whisky was at the bottom of his fault.

It was not the first time in warfare that a good plan had been spoiled by a drunken officer.

The series of misfortunes, however, was not ended by these two disasters.

Fred Henning had not been unmindful of the advice of Betty Marks that he should catch a Stacey, but since the building of the barricades, had looked out sharply for a chance to obey her instructions.

As soon as he discovered the occupation of the shoemaker's house by the enemy, it was easy to guess its meaning, and to connect it with a combined attack on the barricades.

Anticipating such an attack, he prepared a trap in which he hoped to catch a Stacey.

From the western barricade he moved a box out of the line and to the outside of it, leaving a visible break in that portion of the defenses.

When the second charge was started, he stepped outside the line, and concealed himself behind the box with a man upon whom he could rely for what he called sharp work.

His trap worked better than he had expected it to, catching larger game than he had hoped to get hold of.

Though it was near dusk when the second attack was made, Colonel Jeff Stacey had noticed the break in the defensive line.

Never suspecting its real purpose, he supposed that it was caused by carelessness on the part of the enemy, being probably an opening made at the former attack, which had been overlooked.

That was his objective point, and through that gap he meant to go.

He aimed at it, and reached it safely, with a few followers at his back, the rest being distributed along the line of the barricade.

It seemed to him just then that he had struck a good thing, as that point, though evidently a weak one, appeared to be insufficiently guarded.

Beckoning to the men behind him, he rushed for the break, hoping to get in there easily and make havoc among the enemy.

He got in more easily than he expected, and more rapidly than he wished.

Just as he reached the gap, Flush Fred and his comrade sprung out from behind the box in the rear, seized him, and rushed him violently inside.

Almost before he knew what had happened to him, he was disarmed, and was tied hand and foot.

His followers suddenly discovered that there were plenty of men to defend the gap, and were glad of a chance to run for their lives, after which the opening was closed, and the defenders of the barricades were free to give their entire attention to the attack from the eastward.

When the two attacks had been repelled, darkness had set in, and the commissary department was brought into play.

Charley Taintor, who was of course the commissary, had prepared an abundant meal for the defenders of the barricades, under an order or guarantee from Andrew Bates, as money seemed to be no object to that gentleman in the great Stacey war.

A detachment was detailed to occupy and hold the shoemaker's house, and the men were sent in to their meal in squads, so that there should always be enough to watch and defend the barricades against a sudden attack.

It did not look as if these precautions were really necessary, as the Staceyites appeared to be quite as much occupied with the idea of getting something to eat as the Independents were.

For a time, indeed, they nearly disappeared from the street, and quiet prevailed in Staceyville.

Andrew Bates, Fred Henning and Ben Stanniford had their supper served in a private room, and Charley Taintor joined them there.

Though the landlord of the Staceyville Hotel had borne up bravely thus far, and had manfully stuck to his new friends, he became nervous and depressed in the presence of such fierce and bloody warfare as the day had witnessed.

He felt that he was running a great risk, and, as he was a man of family, with all his posses-

sions right there, he was worried by fears for the future.

"Why, Charley, old boy, you look as solemn as an owl," remarked Flush Fred as the landlord seated himself at the table.

"I feel solemn," he replied. "This has been a terrible day, and I don't know what the end of the trouble will be."

"I can tell you what it will be," interposed Mr. Bates. "We are going to give those Staceys such a shaking up and settling down, that they will be glad to hunt their holes and keep quiet. We have hit them some hard blows, and we are going to keep on pounding until we beat into their thick heads the fact that they don't own the earth."

"That is all well enough for you, Mr. Bates, who are an outsider, and don't own property here."

"Don't own property! Why, man alive, my moneyed interests in this county are ever so much heavier than yours."

"I hadn't thought of that. But you have not got all you are worth invested here, as I have, and your family is not dependent upon your business here for a living. Suppose the Staceys should win this fight and keep the upper hand, what will there be left for me among them? If they should do nothing worse, they might be expected to persecute me and ruin my business. Even if they should be beaten out of their boots, there would still be plenty of Staceys about here, and they would hate me and do all they could to harm me."

"You take a gloomy view of the affair, Mr. Taintor."

"I am speaking plainly, and I must confess that it has a gloomy look to me."

Mr. Bates's bright smile was a pleasant contrast to the landlord's solemn looks.

"Now, Mr. Taintor," said he, "let us see if we can't take a more cheerful view of the situation. It is my belief that the Staceys are going to get such a thrashing as will last them a long time, and that the men who join in to whip them will have the upper hand here after this, and can keep it if they want to. In that event you need fear nothing from the Staceys, and I will be responsible for any damage to your property or business in the meantime. But that is not all."

"What is beyond that?" inquired the landlord.

"It is my opinion, Charley Taintor, that you are entirely too good a man to be wasted in such a dried-up hole of a place as Staceyville, and I would like to take you out of here and put you in charge of an establishment in Memphis where you will have a chance to spread yourself."

Charley Taintor's honest face brightened up amazingly.

This was something better than he could have hoped for, and the clouds that had obscured the future were at once chased away.

"Mr. Bates, you are a brick!" he exclaimed. "I might have known that you wouldn't leave me in the lurch, and I had no business to grumble and complain. You may count on me in this difficulty to any extent, and whatever I can do to help you will be cheerfully done."

"All right, Charley; but we don't want you to risk your life, unless you should happen to get excited, as you did a while ago. Now, if you please, I wish you would ask some of our friends to bring Colonel Jeff Stacey in here, as we have a bone to pick with him."

CHAPTER XXI.

TOUGH JEFF STACEY.

COLONEL JEFF STACEY was brought into the room under guard, and was seated in a chair.

Though his feet were free, his hands were still confined, but at Fred Henning's request he was untied.

The prisoner was naturally cast down by his sudden and unexpected capture, but was not dismayed, and surely was not the least bit frightened.

He looked defiantly at his captors, and his only response to their polite greeting was a scowl.

"We are glad to meet you, colonel," remarked Henning. "Under the present circumstances we are glad to meet you right here."

The colonel evidently was not glad, and he was not going to say that he was.

"This is a nice little family party," observed Fred. "We are having supper, as you perceive, and a very good supper it is, too. For the Southern style of cookery, I think that Charley Taintor's cook is one of the best I ever met, and she only needs better materials to work with than can be found in such a backwoods place as Staceyville. By the way, we are going to change the name of the town before we are through with it."

"Are you afflicted with a running off at the tongue?" inquired Colonel Jeff. "Talk seems to be cheap with you."

"But it isn't everybody who can put himself outside of such a supper as this just now. You, for instance—I shouldn't wonder if you would like to have some of it. I doubt if you have had anything to eat in a long time—surely not since noon. Would you care to join us?"

"Wouldn't object," gruffly answered the colonel.

"I am really afraid that we can't allow it, though. We will want to get the truth out of you, colonel, and it is possible that we may have to starve it out."

"Starve away, then, but don't give me any more of your durned foolishness. I am tired of that."

"Do let the gentleman sit down to his supper in peace," interposed Andrew Bates. "Draw up your chair, colonel, and help yourself. That is what you was invited in here for. As we may have to hang you before long, we have no right to starve you."

This was also somewhat ungracious; but Colonel Jeff was hungry, and the meal was an appetizing one, and he hastened to do ample justice to it.

"You folks are playing a big game," he blurted out when he had partially satisfied his hunger.

"Do you refer to the game I played when I caught you out yonder?" inquired Flush Fred. "That was a pretty sharp game, I flatter myself, and my little trap worked admirably."

"I am speaking of your riot and rebellion against the constituted authorities."

"Yes, we are working that scheme up pretty well, and we flatter ourselves that we are going to win. The fact is, my dear colonel, it has been decreed that the Staceys must go."

"You will all go to the gallows before that happens. There are Staceys enough here to eat you all up."

"They bit on us to-day, but found it right hard chewing."

"I know what that man is after," declared Colonel Jeff, pointing quite impolitely at Andrew Bates. "He wants to make money out of this business, but he will lose more than he will gain. He don't care how many people may suffer, if he can get his pitiful money; but he will have to pay for his fun with the rest of you."

"I suppose you would call my action a new way to collect old debts," observed Mr. Bates. "Desperate diseases, my friend, require desperate remedies, and the Stacey disease is a desperate one. I am inclined to believe that the remedy will work a cure."

"It is hardly worth while for us to argue the question with this gentleman," said Henning. "Time will tell; and the proof of the pudding is in the eating. We invited the colonel in here for another purpose, and to that we will now give our attention."

Flush Fred faced the prisoner as he spoke, gazing at him with a look of cold and bitter determination that fairly made him shudder.

"What's the matter?" stammered Colonel Jeff. "What do you want out of me?"

"The truth, and we mean to have it. I have heard it said, colonel, and I believe it was truly said, that you are one of the meanest and most cantankerous of the Staceys, and I can assure you that we don't mean to show you a bit of mercy unless you come to our terms and tell us what we want to know."

"What do you want to know?"

"The truth. If you have anything of that kind about you, you had better give it up before we take measures to squeeze it out of you."

"What do you want to know, I say?"

"You told Mr. Stanniford and me that we were accused of having abducted Miss Eva Bramwell. What we want to know is, first, whether it is true that that young lady has disappeared from Bramwell Stacey's house."

"It is a fact, and if you don't know it, there's nobody else that does."

"Under the circumstances, colonel, and considering your position as a prisoner and a guest, I can't call you a liar, and must leave you to form your opinion on that point. My second question is, who carried off the young lady?"

"You did," stoutly answered Colonel Jeff. "That's what you are accused of, and there's witnesses to prove that you did it."

"The remark that I have just made applies to that statement. Really, colonel, I must advise you to pull the cork out of your bottle of truth, if there is such an article in your possession, as this sort of thing can't be allowed to go on much longer. My third and last question is, what has become of Miss Bramwell?"

"That is more than I can tell you, sah. If you don't know, who does?"

From Flush Fred's eyes flashed an ugly and vindictive fire, and even tough Jeff Stacey quailed before that almost murderous look.

"You put me out of patience," said Fred. "You can give true answers, if you will, to the questions I have asked you. I have no doubt that the facts are in your possession, and you must be persuaded to part with them. We had thought of starving the truth out of you; but that would be too slow a process, and we must squeeze it out."

"What do you mean by squeeze it out?" muttered the prisoner.

"Squeeze it out by way of your neck. Such deliberate and persistent lying as you are guilty of is a hanging matter."

"Do you mean to say that you will hang me?"

"Unless you tell us the full and exact truth, and that very soon, we will hang you by the neck until you are dead, and may the Lord of Ananias have mercy on your soul!"

"Don't it seem to you that you folks are going too far?" protested the prisoner. "Have you no fear of the law?"

"We have waded into this thing over our shoe-tops, and may as well go up to our knees. We must have the truth at any price."

"Go on with your hangin', then. You'll get no answers from me but what I have given you."

At this point the proceedings, which had become interesting to all concerned, were suddenly interrupted in a startling manner.

Shouts and cries, especially the screams of women, resounded from the rear of the hotel where the kitchen was located, and with them were mingled shots and the loud voices of men.

"The Staceys!" cried Charley Taintor, and he and his three friends sprang up to meet what was clearly a fresh attack on the part of the enemy.

Jeff Stacey saw his opportunity; but perhaps he was a little too quick to seize it.

Reaching forward as Flush Fred rose, the prisoner jerked from the young man's belt the revolver that was conspicuous there.

"It is my turn now!" he shouted. "The Staceys will be on top now, and we'll see who will do the hangin'."

"Go on!" Henning ordered his friends. "I will deal with this man."

They took him at his word, and hastened out to meet the attack in the rear, which was evidently a fierce and serious one.

"I'll settle your hash, anyhow, you river-gambling rascal!" roared Colonel Jeff, and his eyes sparkled with malice as he cocked the revolver.

If he had been thoughtful enough to put the table between himself and his antagonist, he would have had him at his mercy; but Fred Henning, even though unarmed, was not afraid of a leveled revolver when he was near enough to the man who held it.

He was as cool as an iceberg, and as calm as a day in Indian summer.

To all appearances his life was merely a question of seconds; but two or three seconds would be enough for him, and he thought he was secure of those.

A quick and sharp glance showed him that the hammer of the revolver was raised over a nipple that had no cap on it—that is to say, a chamber that had been discharged.

The discovery made him smile.

He could afford to give his adversary that shot, but was not likely to give him another.

Colonel Jeff did not notice the condition of the weapon when he cocked it, as his eye was fixed on his antagonist with deadly intent.

As soon as he uttered his threat he leveled the revolver and pulled the trigger; but the hammer fell harmlessly.

The imprecation that rose to his lips was choked down.

Flush Fred rushed in, grasping his adversary's throat with his right hand, while with his left he grabbed at the revolver.

The suddenness of the attack, and the severity of the pressure upon his throat, compelled Colonel Jeff to drop the weapon and come to a clinch.

Then it was that Fred Henning "had him."

Though Colonel Jeff was bigger and brawnier than he, the man from the river was all muscle and as active as a cat.

He had got the underhold, too, or the inside hold, and knew how to use it.

While his antagonist was wildly pawing at him, Fred dropped his throat grasp, took a body hold, and with his left foot knocked out the big man's underpinning.

Colonel Jeff toppled and fell, his head striking a corner of the table in his descent, and when he reached the floor he was senseless.

Henning promptly turned him over on his face, and tied his hands behind his back with the cord that had previously been used for that purpose.

This conflict had covered such a small space of time, that it was not too late for the victor to join his friends in repelling the attack from the rear of the hotel.

Without stopping to put another cartridge in the revolver he had picked up, he hastened away.

CHAPTER XXII.

AN ATTACK IN THE REAR.

AT the rear of the hotel the situation was pretty serious just then.

The fact of the capture of Colonel Jeff Stacey was not generally known until his repulsed and discomfited followers had returned to their position out of reach of the enemy's fire.

Then it was discovered that he was missing, and nobody knew what had become of him until a wounded man came limping in and said that he had seen the colonel seized and run inside of the barricade by two of the Independents.

The news was very depressing to the Stacey-

ites in that quarter, who sent a messenger around to Judge Stacey to inform him of this last disaster.

Judge Stacey, who was in reality commander-in-chief of the Staceyite armies, had been grumbling for some time about the separation of the force into two bodies, and was convinced that the recent series of disasters was clearly the result of that separation.

As combined action appeared to be impossible, it was best that all should be united under one head, and there could be no better head than his own.

Consequently he sent an order to the other body to join him at the eastern side of the barricades, and they obeyed the order by making a detour to the rear of the shoemaker's house.

The men were then dismissed, to get their suppers wherever they could find them, and Judge Stacey held a consultation with a few of the leading Staceyites, to decide upon the next step to be taken.

It was admitted that the capture of Jeff Stacey was a calamity, and that his rescue was a matter of the highest importance, not only on account of the disheartening effect that his continued captivity would produce upon his followers, but because of the possible ill-treatment that he might sustain at the hands of the enemy.

Of course he was a prisoner in the hotel, and could be reached and rescued only by the capture of that position.

It occurred to Judge Stacey that an attack upon the hotel from the rear would be likely to prove successful, and if so the campaign would be ended at a blow.

The chances were that the rear of the hotel was unguarded, and that a surprise attack would put the assailants in possession of the premises before the enemy could know what had happened to them.

Bramwell Stacey declared that if there had been a sufficient force under his immediate command, and he had not submitted to the guidance of Colonel Jeff, he would have captured the hotel before then, instead of wasting men and time by butting against the street barricades.

That, he said, would have demoralized the enemy utterly by striking them "where they lived."

It was not too late to win the game by this play, and the capture of Colonel Jeff made the move more necessary than ever.

Therefore Judge Stacey, having decided upon attacking the hotel from the rear, proceeded to put his plan in execution with the least possible delay.

Perhaps he was a little too quick in action after his design was formed.

In fact, it may be said of the Staceys that they were as a rule inclined to be "too previous," prone to act upon impulse, and without sufficient forethought and preparation.

His idea was that he ought to strike the Independents at their supper hour, when they would be taking their ease, with their minds disengaged from the duty of attending to their defenses.

Accordingly, as his men came straggling in at what might be termed the headquarters of the army, he held them in readiness until he thought he had enough for his purpose.

Then he formed them into a battalion, under the command of a Stacey whom he could trust, and sent them around to attack the hotel in the rear.

To insure the success of this movement, he promised to make a diversion in favor of the party by attacking the barricade.

In this, it will be perceived, he was a little too hasty, as he could not be sure of being able to use his men before he had them in hand.

The men who were to capture the hotel were well led, and as they went to their work there seemed to be every prospect of their success.

They found no difficulty in making their way unperceived to the rear of the building, and in fact were not discovered until they were ready to spring upon their foes.

It was then, however, that their troubles began.

The first obstacle in their way was Big Mary, the chief cook of the hotel, a stalwart negro woman, as black as charcoal and as strong as a mule.

She was stepping out of the kitchen door with a pail of boiling water in her hand, when she discovered a body of armed men, who had evidently come over the fence, creeping toward the house.

She did not know who they were, but was sure that they were there for no good.

Being pretty badly scared, notwithstanding her size and strength, she "fetched a yell" that was heard through the hotel and out on the street.

When the Staceyites rushed at her to silence her, she flung the pailful of boiling water in their faces, and retreated into the kitchen, where the other servants added their screams to hers.

Scarcely anything can have a more depressing effect, even upon warlike men, than boiling water, and several of the assailants were badly damaged by the scalding fluid.

Besides giving the alarm, Big Mary had succeeded in delaying their attack, thus giving the Independents a chance to rally to repel them.

Flush Fred had been thoughtful enough to detail four men to watch and guard the rear entrance to the hotel; but, as it happened, they were not attending to their duties as closely as they should have done, and the intended surprise would have been effective but for Big Mary's alarm and her pail of hot water.

At the first yell they rushed to the door and opened fire upon the assailants.

There was also a squad of half a dozen men in the dining-room, who had of course brought in their weapons, and they jumped up from their supper and took part in the action.

Then came Charley Taintor and Ben Stanniford and Andrew Bates, shortly followed by Fred Henning.

Men also came rushing in from the street barricades, until they were ordered back by Flush Fred, acting as general in command.

He believed that he already had enough there for the defense of the hotel, and that the barricades might be in danger.

They ought to have been in danger, but they were not.

If Judge Stacey had just then performed his promise of making an attack in that quarter, he would have greatly aided the party at the hotel, and would have given them something like a fair chance to accomplish their object.

But, as "the stars in their courses fought against Sisera," so was luck that day against the Staceys.

The men who had gone to get their suppers did not return near as rapidly as Judge Stacey had expected them to, and, though he sent messengers after them, they could not be hurried forward fast enough to suit him.

Consequently, when the firing began at the hotel, he had not a sufficient force to charge the enemy in his front, and hard swearing did not help the case a bit.

The only thing he could do was to send forward the men as fast as they came in, with orders to keep up a constant fire from convenient points in the street, hoping thus to annoy the Independents and hold them where they were.

The men behind the barricades, however, soon perceived that no real attack was intended, and they paid little attention to the desultory firing.

Thus it happened that there were plenty of men in the hotel to meet the attack in the rear.

They had, also, the cover of the house, and the advantage of the lower and upper windows to fire from, while their opponents were in the open comparatively.

Under these conditions the combat became one-sided, and was soon over.

When a charge was made from the house, the defeated Staceys scampered and got away under cover of the darkness, and the wounded men they left behind were captured and carried into the hotel.

Flush Fred was still unhurt, and so were Ben Stanniford and Andrew Bates.

Charley Taintor had received a flesh wound in his left arm; but that was a matter of little consequence.

The four friends washed their hands and faces, and returned to the room in which Colonel Jeff Stacey had been left.

He had recovered his senses, had succeeded in getting into a sitting posture, and was struggling to free his hands.

CHAPTER XXIII.

AT THE LAST GASP.

"Now, Colonel Stacey, if you please," observed Fred Henning, "we will return to the subject which we were discussing a little while ago."

The prisoner looked up with an air of bewilderment.

"You needn't stare at me like that," continued his tormentor. "There is nothing at all the matter with us. Not a single fly on us. We are all right, I assure you. Allow me to help you to a seat, and then I will tell you all about it."

Colonel Jeff was lifted into a chair, where he grumbled at the style in which his hands were tied behind his back.

"It is a pity about that," said Fred; "but it can't be helped. You were so vicious when your hands were free a little while ago, that we really must not let you have the use of them now. It is my duty to inform you, colonel, that the Staceys are not on top, as you had fondly hoped they would be. They made a bad failure of their last little scheme. They tried to capture the hotel by attacking it from the rear, but were fearfully thrashed."

Colonel Jeff groaned audibly.

"Yes, it is very sad for you, and we are mean enough to rejoice in your misfortunes. Your friends can't stand many more such blows. Indeed, they must be nearly knocked to pieces by this time. As I told you, colonel, it has been decreed that the Staceys must go."

"Just wait till the men from Swampville

come in," roared the angry colonel, "and then you'll see who's on top."

"I fancy that we can worry the men from Swampville," replied Fred. "We have more friends to come in, too. I suppose that you really do not know how you Staceys have got yourselves bated in this county."

"Mighty little we care for that."

"Under the circumstances, colonel Stacey, it would be advisable for you to part with a little of that information which you keep so carefully concealed, and tell us what we want to know."

"You will get nothing out of me. I will answer no more questions."

"Ask me no questions, and I'll tell you no lies. That is your platform, I suppose. Well, it is better than a continued course of lying. You ought not to go out of the world with a lie on your lips; for we do mean to hang you, Colonel Stacey. Unless you come down with the truth, we will hang you until you are as dead as Julius Cæsar."

"Go on with the hangin'. I reckon I can stand it as well as you can. I don't see, though, what chance there is here for that kind of work."

"Oh, the arrangements are handy enough. No trouble about that. Get the rope, Charley, please."

Charley Taintor brought in a rope in which a noose had been neatly knotted.

"It is not exactly the article I could have wished it to be," observed Henning, as he passed the line through his hands. "A little too large, as you perceive. But it is the best we can do, colonel, and you must make allowances."

The prisoner turned pale, and gritted his teeth.

"Now, colonel," said Fred, "if you will have the kindness to accompany us, we will see what we can do for you."

Colonel Jeff had that kindness when he was seized by two men and led out into the yard at the rear of the hotel.

A big Juneapple tree grew there, with a limb which, though not far from the ground, was high enough for hanging purposes.

The kitchen was then dark and deserted, the servants having refused to return to it after the combat.

Though it was night, a piece of a moon in a clear sky gave sufficient light.

The noose was placed around Jeff Stacey's neck with the knot drawn close under his left ear, and the rope was thrown over the limb of the Juneapple tree.

A few men were called in from the street defenses, and stood ready to aid in the execution, if an execution it was to be.

"You had better go slow," protested the prisoner. "This business will bring you men to the gallows."

"That is our lookout," replied Fred Henning. "Are you ready to answer my question? Where is Miss Eva Bramwell?"

"I have nothing to say."

"Run him up!"

The men pulled with a will, and Jeff Stacey slowly rose in the air at the end of a rope.

The bough of the Juneapple tree bent with his weight, until his feet were but a little distance from the ground; but that distance was sufficient for the purpose of the inquisitors.

His eyes were starting from their sockets, and his face was becoming discolored, when Flush Fred made a sign, and he was quickly lowered.

He came to the ground in a limp and doubled-up condition, but had not lost his senses, though he was badly dazed and demoralized.

The rope around his neck was immediately loosened, and a whisky flask that was put to his lips revived him.

"Don't you do that again," he murmured, "Don't you dare to do it."

"You will force us to do worse than that," said Flush Fred, "unless you come down with the truth. I will give you one more chance. Where is Miss Bramwell?"

The prisoner replied with a savage imprecation and a resolute refusal to answer the question.

"Run him up!" ordered the leader.

Again the bough of the Juneapple tree bent under the weight of Jeff Stacey, and again his eyes started from their sockets, and his face turned purple, with a tendency toward a yet darker hue.

This time he hung a little longer than when he was drawn up before, and was probably less able to bear the strain.

Watching him closely, Flush Fred gave the signal to lower him again, and when he reached the ground he was senseless, though it was evident that life was not extinct.

Water was dashed in his face, and the infallible whisky remedy was used; but the struggles of returning life were difficult and apparently the most painful part of his severe experience.

When he opened his eyes and breathed, he was still so helpless that he had to be supported in a sitting posture.

Flush Fred knelt down and questioned him sharply.

"Where is Miss Bramwell? Tell us that, and we will let you go."

Jeff Stacey had been so sorely tried, and was just then so weak and nerveless, that his resolution failed him.

"Staghead Hills," he murmured, between a gasp and a gurgle, and went off in a faint.

Just then there arose an uproar in the street, and a man from there came running through the hotel to bring a piece of exciting news.

"That's a bigger crowd of Staceys out there than ever," he cried. "Jim Hedley has been scootin' around, and he says that a lot o' men from Swampville have joined 'em. They're comin' at us, too, right now, jest a-bilin'!"

This was important and disheartening intelligence.

It looked as if the luck of the Independents was about to change, and that after their arduous efforts and signal victories they were to be defeated and overpowered at last.

What Jeff Stacey predicted had happened—the men from Swampville had come in, and the Independents had received no new recruits to balance the gain of their adversaries.

But the new danger must be confronted, and every man would be required to meet it, and there was not a moment to be lost.

"Leave that man alone," ordered Flush Fred. "He will come to after a bit, and he can't get away."

Jeff Stacey, in fact, was lying on the ground under the Juneapple tree, to all appearance lifeless, and surely incapable of the least exertion.

Leaving him there, Fred Henning and his friends hurried through the hotel, and hastily prepared to meet the onset of the enemy.

CHAPTER XXIV. ONE OF THE QUEENS.

THE situation in the street was very serious—more serious, indeed, though they were not aware of the full extent of the danger, than any emergency they had been forced to meet.

After the failure of the attack on the hotel, Judge Stacey had sent out swift and urgent messengers to hurry up the Swampville men.

They were tough citizens, those Swampvillians, and, though but few of them were Staceys, they lived on lands that were owned by Staceys, to whom they felt themselves bound like feudal retainers to their chiefs.

Though they belonged, without exception, to the unvalued class of human beings known as "poor whites," they were noted far and wide for their fighting propensities.

When they failed to find any other people to fight, they fought among themselves, and it was this practice that kept them from increasing and multiplying too rapidly.

Judge Stacey had summoned them to Staceyville with the rest of his adherents, and they had promised to come, but were slow to move, especially as horseflesh was scarce among them.

When they did arrive, their numbers and their eagerness to fight raised the spirits of the Staceyites to a high pitch, producing a corresponding depression among their antagonists when their presence became known.

Fred Henning and Andrew Bates noticed this depression as soon as they joined the men at the barricades; but they could not afford to add their uneasiness to that of the others, as it was of the greatest importance that confidence should be restored if possible.

They cheered and encouraged the men to the best of their ability, reminding them of the victories they had already won, and declaring that if they would stand solidly up to their work and do their best, they would again repel the assault of the enemy.

At the same time they busied themselves in strengthening the defenses and stationing the defenders where they could be most effectively employed.

They had, however, little time for encouragement and preparation.

The night was then pretty well advanced; but the Staceyites seemed to be determined to fight the quarrel out as long as they could stand up, and their opponents were compelled to imitate their example.

As a piece of a moon and the stars in a clear sky gave light enough for plenty of fighting, it was to be expected that nothing but defeat or exhaustion would bring the conflict to a close.

Judge Stacey, believing that he then had an overwhelming force under his command, had decided that he would not waste their energies on any side issues, but would bear right down on the barricades with all his strength, crushing his foes or sweeping them away.

So he hastened to order a charge, which was made in fine style, the men from Swampville eagerly and impetuously leading the attack.

The Staceyites came on at first in a solid phalanx; but after awhile detachments spread out at each side of the street, availing themselves of such cover as they could find there, and opening a close and rapid fire on the barricade, while the main body swept forward gallantly to the attack.

The Independents stood up to their work manfully, though their style of action was by no means as lively and spirited as it had been.

It seemed, indeed, that their utmost exertions would not avail them then, and that the fierce

rush of the wild men from Swampville would carry everything before it.

Some of the assaulting party had in fact climbed over or broken through the barricade before the rush was stopped.

Even then the stoppage was only temporary, a delay rather than a repulse.

The Swampvillians did not give way an inch, and the men who had been scattered along the sides of the street were rapidly coming forward and closing in to their support.

Flush Fred, despairing of holding the barricade longer, was about to give the order to retreat to the hotel, when something occurred that drew the attention of both parties from each other.

The clattering of horses' hoofs were heard toward the eastern end of the village, and a party of mounted men came galloping down the street.

Who could they be?

The Staceyites were expecting no more reinforcements, and the Independents knew of nobody who would be likely to come to their aid.

The question was speedily settled by the newcomers, who charged the rear of the Staceyites, firing on them right and left and scattering them as they swept toward the barricade.

Then there arose a shout from the Independents, and Fred Henning no longer thought of ordering a retreat.

But who could these welcome auxiliaries be?

"There is a woman with them!" cried Ben Stanniford. "A woman is leading them."

"Betty Marks, by Heaven!" shouted Flush Fred.

Infused with fresh energy, he gave new orders to men who were filled with fresh hope.

"Over and at them, boys! Over and at them! Our friends have scattered them, and we can drive them out of town if we whirl into them. Whoop 'em up lively, now!"

"Over and at them" was the word, and the Staceyites hastened to get outside of the barricade and help stampede their enemies.

The newcomers were not as careful of their horseflesh as the Staceyites had been, and they were right about that, as they had the guarantee of Betty Marks that all losses would be made good to them.

Their horses, as much as themselves, had scattered the Staceyites and started the stampede.

Without waiting for the stricken foe to rally, they turned before they reached the barricade, completing the demoralization which they had so well begun.

At the same time the Independents broke forth from the barricade, and pressed forward with cheers and yells, driving their opponents wherever they found them, and sending them whirling up the street.

Within half an hour there was not one acknowledged Staceyite, alive and unwounded, left in Staceyville.

Betty Marks and her party, having finished their work, rode back to the hotel, where the barricade was opened to let them in.

It was but a small party, considering what it had accomplished, and the wonder was that it had been able to do so much.

The surprise, no doubt, of an attack in the rear, coupled with the terrors of a cavalry charge, was what had demoralized the Staceyites.

While the party was warmly greeted by the men to whose rescue they had come, their fair commander dismounted and entered the hotel with Fred Henning and Ben Stanniford.

"And so it is you who have done this," said Fred. "You came just in time to save us from a deuce of a thrashing."

"It was for you, partner of mine," answered the lady, with a look that could not be mistaken. "You were in danger, and I came to help you."

"And you risked your life to do it."

"I don't know about that. At least, I did not notice the risk. You see, Fred, I had been raising recruits for this war. Some of them I sent in here, and others I picked up as I could find them; but it was some time before I could get together enough to count. I had men on the move between my house and Staceyville, to inform me of what was going on, and when they told me that matters were still dubious, I mounted my cavalry, and we came to town pretty quick, I can tell you. It seems that I got here just in time to help you out of a bad scrape."

"Indeed you did, and you saved us all. I wonder that the men allowed you to risk yourself as you did."

"Would you believe it, Fred? Martha Gibbs wanted to come with me as second in command; but I gave her strict orders to hold the fort at home, and she is on guard there as fierce as a Trojan. For my part, the excitement of the night has done me a world of good."

"You have done a splendid stroke of business in this war, and I hope that it will be of much benefit to Miss Bramwell."

"Poor Eva! Where can she be?"

"That reminds me of something," said Fred, as he rose from his seat. "I had forgotten my prisoner. I must go and look after him."

"What prisoner?" she inquired.

"Do you remember that you told me to catch a Stacey?"

"Yes, and to squeeze the truth out of him."

"I did not forget your advice, and I had the luck to capture no less a person than Colonel Jeff Stacey. We have been trying to squeeze the truth out of him by hanging him, and we came near squeezing the life out of him. I left him senseless at the rear of the hotel when the last alarm was given, and I must go and see how he is getting on."

"I will go with you," said Miss Marks, and the three adjourned to the Juneapple tree at the rear of the hotel.

There they found Andrew Bates and Charley Taintor, who were looking about as if amazed or puzzled.

Jeff Stacey was not visible.

"What has become of the prisoner?" demanded Flush Fred.

Nobody knew. Mr. Bates and the landlord had just come out there, and had failed to find him, and no person had seen him since the hanging.

The conviction was finally forced upon the minds of his captors that he had escaped.

Whether he had succeeded in freeing his hands, or had been able to get over the fence while they were tied behind his back, was a question which the curious might consider, but which was of no practical importance.

It was certain that he had got away, and Fred Henning, for one, was disposed to consider his departure a good riddance.

"It is just as well," said Fred. "We did not need to keep him. We had got what we wanted out of him, anyhow."

"What did you learn?" asked Betty Marks.

"Where Miss Bramwell is."

"Where is she, then?"

"At Staghead Hills, if you know where that is."

"I do not; but there are plenty who do, no doubt."

CHAPTER XXV. A SPY DISCOVERED.

THE historian of the great Stacey war must now leave, not at all reluctantly, scenes of battle and bloodshed, of attack and defense, of strategy and generalship, to inquire into a matter which, though apparently a mere episode, was really the exciting cause of the startling events that have been narrated.

To do this it is necessary to go back a little distance, to the day that witnessed the last visit which has been mentioned of Fred Henning and Ben Stanniford to the mansion of Betty Marks.

On that day there was a convocation of Staceys at the house of Judge Bramwell Stacey.

It was not a numerous gathering; but the sharpest and most influential of the Staceys were there, having been summoned to a consultation by the head of the clan.

Jake Tolliver was there, faithfully obeying, to the best of his ability, the instructions which he had received from Fred Henning.

Since he received those instructions he had been sneaking about the place, creeping here and climbing there, hiding when it was necessary to hide, generally keeping out of the way of those to whom his presence might seem suspicious, and successfully avoiding discovery.

When the consultation of Staceys was held in the dining-room, he was sure that some matter of importance was about to be considered, and determined to find out what was said and done.

This was no easy matter, even for him, as it was broad daylight, and hiding-places near the house were scarce and not to be depended on.

However, he concealed himself as well as he could among some shrubs and vines at one of the dining-room windows, after raising the window a little, and there he looked and listened.

The meeting proved to be one of importance, as Judge Stacey had called his friends together to consider what should be done concerning Fred Henning and his friend, after the ignominious failure of Major Stacey's attempt to rid the neighborhood of them.

Judge Stacey was explaining the object of the meeting, when a pair of sharp eyes caught sight of Jake Tolliver's face at the window-pane outside.

The sharp eyes belonged to Wash Stacey, who made no outcry about his discovery nor caused the least excitement.

He merely touched the judge on the arm, interrupting the flow of his eloquence.

"Excuse me," said Wash, "but if you will step aside with me for a moment, I would like to have a word in private with you before we go any further."

Judge Stacey complied with this request, wondering what was the matter, as did all the others.

"The fact is, Cousin Bramwell," confidentially observed the discoverer, "that somebody is watching and listening to us."

"How do you know that?"

"I saw a face bob up at a window just now—a face that has something of the look of a dog's face, though it belongs to a boy. Can't you guess who it is?"

"Jake Tolliver?"

"Yes, it is Jake Tolliver."

"What can he be there for?"

"No good, of course. Perhaps he is a spy."

"But why? Has he got brains enough for that sort of thing?"

"He is as smart as a steel-trap, though he don't look it. Anyhow, his presence at that window is suspicious."

"Yes, and he must be captured. You had better take somebody with you, Wash, and slip around the house, one on each side, and nab him and bring him in here."

Judge Stacey returned to his friends and continued his discourse, making no allusion to what he had learned.

Wash Stacey and another slipped out of the house, and approached the concealed spy from opposite directions.

He was so intently occupied in listening just then, that he would not have noticed them if they had come upon him less stealthily.

He did not discover them until it was too late to escape, though he made a vigorous effort to do so.

Jake Tolliver was as slippery as an eel; but the two men gripped him firmly, and dragged him to the house and into the dining-room.

The lad had quickly decided what he would do and say when put the question, and that was nothing at all.

He fully expected to be sentenced to a severe whipping; but no torture should induce him to disclose his business there, or the name of his employer.

Therefore, when Judge Stacey sternly ordered him to tell what he was doing at that window, he put on a vacant, half-idiotic look, and made no answer.

He was threatened with serious pains and penalties if he refused to make known his purpose; but he cast down his head, picked at his ragged clothing, and said nothing.

"The boy is a fool," declared Bramwell Stacey.

"Not a bit of it," said Wash. "He is playing a sharp game, and he thinks that he is too smart for us."

"Well, we can't fool with him now. We will attend to his case after awhile. Take him upstairs, Wash, and lock him in the trunk-room. He can't get out of there unless he breaks a limb, and I reckon he is too smart for that."

Jake was lugged up-stairs, thrust into a small room where there were a few trunks, and the key was turned on him.

This imprisonment, and the hard time that he might expect after awhile, did not worry him at all.

He was only troubled by the thought that he would be unable to hear and report the proceedings of what he supposed to be a very interesting meeting down-stairs.

If Mr. Henning could know how easily and stupidly he had suffered himself to be captured at a critical moment, that gentleman would be seriously offended, and the poor lad had formed such an affection for Flush Fred, that his displeasure would hurt him more than any punishment the Staceys would be likely to inflict upon him.

He did not mean to submit to any punishment, however, and as for the imprisonment, he was sure that he could easily make an end of that.

Thus he had scarcely found himself alone in the trunk room, when he began to look about and consider means of escape.

The room was a small one, and it was empty, except for a few trunks, which were of course locked.

There was one window, which could be easily raised, and the prospect from the window was not at all discouraging.

The room was on the second story of the house, and the distance to the ground was not great enough to make it certain that a jump would seriously injure him, though it might be dangerous.

If he had been in a bedroom, a pair of sheets would have served his purpose; but there was nothing of the kind at hand.

He might lessen the distance by lowering himself from the window sill, and would then be willing to risk the fall; but he thought he saw a safer and easier way to gain his liberty.

At the front corner of the house was a stout Virginia creeper that had climbed to the roof, and such an acrobat as Jake Tolliver would find no serious difficulty in reaching it.

He opened the window, stood on the sill, threw himself to the next one like a monkey, caught the upper casing firmly with both hands, and drew his feet up on the sill.

His only fear was that there might be somebody in one of the rooms who would perceive him and give the alarm; but, as it happened, he was not observed.

In the same way he swung himself to a second window, then to a third, and then he was within reach of the vine, and it was easy enough to make his way silently and swiftly to the ground.

He would gladly have returned to the dining-room window to see and hear what was going on inside; but it was then too late for that, and

there was not enough to be gained to justify the risk.

So he concealed himself near the house, to watch his chances for getting hold of some other information.

Shortly he saw the visiting Staceys come out of the house and mount and ride away.

The conference was over, and he had not been able to find out what it had amounted to.

CHAPTER XXVI.

EVA'S ABDUCTION.

It was a pity that Jake Tolliver was choked off at the beginning of the conference in Bramwell Stacey's house; for, if he had been able to listen to it, he would have learned something that could not have failed to interest his employer.

No doubt Flush Fred afterward made a pretty good guess at what had happened as the result of the meeting; but it would have been a great advantage to him and his friends if they could have got hold of the facts in time.

It was settled by the assembled wisdom that Ben Stanniford and Fred Henning must be got out of the way, by fair means or foul, and it was agreed that Henning was the more dangerous man of the two, though the other was believed to be a suitor for the hand of Eva Bramwell, who was favored by that young lady.

The wrong and ignominy that Flush Fred had already inflicted on the Staceys, on board the steamer Tom Swann, and even there at Staceyville, called for something severe in the way of retribution.

Moreover, the cause of Bramwell Stacey, as the chief of the clan, was the cause of all, and the Staceys were noted for the thoroughness with which they stuck together.

If Bramwell Stacey should fall, there were others of the tribe who would tumble like a row of blocks, and he did not attempt to conceal the fact that he was likely to be a ruined man unless he could marry his son to his niece and ward, and thus secure her fortune.

It was the opinion of all that this very eligible arrangement must be consummated, and that anybody who stood in its way "must go."

The only question was, what should be done to rid the neighborhood of those two obnoxious individuals.

Judge Stacey had a plan to propose, which, was in effect that his niece should be forcibly carried off and put out of the way of her lover and his friend, and that these two should be accused of her abduction.

A warrant would be issued for their arrest, which was to be served by a sufficient force, and when they should be safely lodged in the county jail, it was hoped that there would be an end of their power for mischief.

To prove them guilty of the charge was a matter of little consequence, the point was to get them shut up and out of the way.

Thus the Staceys, as Flush Fred afterward guessed, would be killing two birds with one stone.

So the plan was agreed upon, and the details were settled, a leading point of the arrangement being that the deed should be done in such a manner that Judge Stacey could not be suspected of complicity in the abduction.

Colonel Jeff Stacey was to serve the warrant the next day, and was to select the men necessary to assist him.

All this important information Jake had missed by his capture; but because he had missed it he was more on the alert than ever, determined that nothing should transpire in or about the house without his knowledge, if he could help it.

When the visitors had left the place, Judge Stacey and Tom went up-stairs to look after the captive, and were surprised but not specially troubled when they found him missing.

A little after nine o'clock at night, when Eva Bramwell, for lack of anything else to do, was thinking of going to bed, her uncle hurried into the house, looking troubled and sad.

She asked him what had happened to annoy him.

"To some people it would seem a very small matter," he answered; "but I am very sensitive about the servants among whom my life has been spent, and whatever hurts them hurts me."

Eva had entertained a suspicion that he was not that kind of a man, but she might be mistaken.

"Is anything the matter with them?" she inquired.

"Only one of them. Poor Aunt Cynthia, who was Tom's nurse, has been suddenly taken sick, and none of us know what to do for her. I have sent for a doctor, but he may not get here before morning, and in the mean time the poor creature is suffering."

Eva's sympathies were at once enlisted, and she truly declared that she wished she could be of some service to the sufferer.

"Perhaps you might, my dear. If you would run down there with me, you would be sure to cheer her up, and might do her a great deal of good. Her cabin is half a mile from here, but it is an easy walk."

Eva said that if she could be of any use, she would be glad to go.

"Better put on your hat and a shawl, my child, as the air is a little chilly to-night."

In a few minutes Eva was equipped for the walk, and she sallied forth with her uncle.

The path led through a piece of woods, and they had about reached the middle of the patch, when three men sprung out from among the trees, two of whom seized the young lady, and the third took hold of her uncle.

Eva was unable to make any resistance; but she heard, if she could not see, Judge Stacey struggling manfully.

"Villains!" he cried. "What do you mean, you infernal scoundrel? You shall suffer for this. Help! help!"

She was hurried away so rapidly that she could not know how the struggle terminated.

It terminated as soon as she was out of sight and hearing.

"I reckon that is all right," said Judge Stacey's assistant.

"It seems to be," answered the Judge. "She must have been well fooled, and she surely can't suspect me of having anything to do with the affair. Run on and join the others, now, as I must get back to the house and raise a row."

The man hurried away, and Bramwell Stacey ambled back to the house, where he proceeded to "raise a row," declaring that his niece had been seized and carried away by strangers from Staceyville, who had also tried to murder him.

After thoroughly arousing all about the place, he had horses brought out with a great bustle, and he and Tom mounted, with two of the men-servants, and rode away in a different direction from that which had been taken by Eva's abductors.

When Judge Stacey called for help, he was sure that there was nobody near enough to answer his call; but there was one person within hearing and seeing distance, who might have come forward if he had cared to.

But the burnt child dreads the fire, and Jake Tolliver, having been once captured, was quite unwilling to fall into the clutches of the Staceys again.

Disappointed of his desire to witness the proceedings of the meeting in the house, he was all the more anxious to keep watch of the subsequent occurrences, and nothing took place about the house, after he regained his liberty, that escaped his notice.

When Eva Bramwell left the house with her uncle, Jake Tolliver followed the couple closely, and he was but a few yards away when the young lady was seized by the men who had been waiting for her in the piece of woods.

Though the three men had the upper parts of their faces concealed by black masks, Jake had no difficulty in recognizing them as Staceys, and he jumped at once to the conclusion that the capture of Miss Bramwell was a "put up job."

In this conclusion he was fortified by Judge Stacey's sham struggle, and by that gentleman's remarks after Eva had been got out of the way.

"Hit's as plain as the nose on Tom Stacey's face," the lad confidentially informed himself, "and I on'y wish I could do wot I want to do."

What he wanted to do was to inform Fred Henning of what had happened, and at the same time to see what became of Eva Bramwell.

As he could not accomplish both of these objects, he was compelled to choose between them.

He was sharp enough to understand that the young lady was the main object of interest to his employer, and therefore he determined to keep her in sight and do what he could for her, trusting to luck to enable him to send the news to Mr. Henning.

He saw the two men who had seized Eva take her to the road, where they mounted her on a horse which had evidently been brought for that purpose.

Shortly they were joined by the third man, and the party rode away in an easterly direction.

Then Jack Tolliver girded up his loins—that is to say, he hitched up his ragged trowsers—and ran after them.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE HOUSE IN THE HILLS.

EVA BRAMWELL, not possessing the opportunities for observation that Jake Tolliver gave himself, had no suspicion of the genuineness of her capture or of the duplicity of her uncle.

If she had reflected on the matter, it might have seemed strange to her that two men were required to subdue a helpless girl, while one was considered sufficient to attend to the case of such a stalwart man as Judge Stacey; but she was too badly frightened to reflect.

She heard her uncle abusing her captors, fighting with his tongue if not with his hands, and naturally supposed that he would have come to her aid if it had not been put out of his power to do so.

As for any attempt at resistance on her part, that was out of the question, and at first she was too much overcome to even protest against the treatment to which she had been subjected.

Before she could fairly collect her thoughts she was taken to the road, where four horses were hitched, and was lifted upon one which carried a side-saddle, her two captors standing guard over her until the third man came up and joined them.

Then the three mounted and rode away, one on each side of the young lady, and the third in the rear.

They surely could not have feared pursuit, as they were in no sort of a hurry.

The usual gait of horses in that region, however, except that of the rather unusual pacers, was either a canter or a walk, and the walk to which riding animals were trained was a pretty fast one.

It was not at all surprising, therefore, that the three men, being in no special hurry, allowed their horses to walk.

They had not ridden far when they pulled off their masks and thrust them into their pockets.

Eva then perceived that there was nothing ruffianly about them, that they did not look like villains, but like plain farmers or planters, such as she had occasionally met at her uncle's house during her brief sojourn there.

Their apparent respectability made the fact of her violent abduction utterly inexplicable to her.

As she was not a cowardly young woman, though naturally prone to be overcome by sudden danger or excitement, she easily plucked up courage to inquire into the matter.

"What does this mean?" she demanded. "Who are you, and why have you seized me and carried me away from my home?"

"It's all right, miss," answered the man who rode at her left hand. "We are friends of yours, and we wouldn't hurt a hair of your head for the world. This is a little matter of business, and it's all for your good."

"I do not understand. What has become of my uncle?"

"He's all right, miss. We jest tied him and left him thar. Somebody'll find him afore long and turn him loose."

"How can it be for my good to capture me at night and carry me away from my uncle's house?"

"'Cause that house warn't no good place for you, miss, and that's a fact."

This statement set the young lady to thinking.

Was it possible that her lover and his friend, whom she knew to be at Staceyville, or to have been there lately, had adopted this plan to free her from the influence of Bramwell Stacey, and to get her into their possession?

If so, it seemed to her that they might have used less violent means, or at least given her notice of their intention; but perhaps they had done the best they could, and she only wanted to know if the plan was theirs.

"Were you sent by somebody?" she inquired—"by somebody in Staceyville, by Mr. Stanniford, or by Mr. Henning?"

The man who had previously answered her hesitated, as if he was not sure whether it would not be better for him to admit that she had made a good guess; but, as it happened, his instructions did not cover that point, and he left it doubtful.

"We don't ought to tell you, miss, who put us up to this," he replied, "supposin' that anybody did. I can only say that we won't hurt a hair of your head, and that what we're doin' is for your good."

This was all the information Eva could extract from them, and with this she was compelled to be content, the more easily as it left her the hope that her friends at Staceyville might be at the bottom of the business, though it was strange, if this were so, that her friends had not met her and assured her of her safety.

So the party of four ambled along, mostly in silence, and surely without any speech that was interesting to the person most nearly concerned, for the space of three hours or more, until midnight had been passed, and the small hours of the morning had begun.

Then they reached a hilly country—a country that was both wild and unsettled, where their horses made slower time up-hill and over a road that was gullied and uncared for.

Eva again tried to learn something concerning her destination, but received only the same statement that it was all right and for her good.

At the wildest part of that rough and broken region the party turned aside into what might be considered a neighborhood road, though it showed scarcely travel enough to entitle it to be called a road.

After a little more rough travel, they halted in front of a rudely built and somewhat dilapidated frame house, situated in a clearing of considerable size, and with the appearance of good land about it.

As they rode up, they were greeted by the hoarse barking of a gaunt yellow dog that came out to meet them; but nobody paid any attention to his demonstrations, and the horsemen dismounted at the front door.

As Eva was assisted to alight, the door opened and a frowsy-headed, half-dressed woman appeared there, with a tallow candle in her hand.

"Is this the gal?" she asked.

"Yes'm," answered the leader of the party.

"Reckon you'd better go right up-stairs to your room, miss, as you're bound to be tired and sleepy."

As there seemed to be nothing else for her to do, Eva stepped forward to comply with this suggestion; but the woman stopped to speak to the leader of the party in a low tone which the young lady overheard.

"Say, Jim, the major's been durned obstreperous, but I quieted him down, and I reckon he's gone to sleep now."

"All right, Mrs. Allstrup. The doctor'll be here in the mornin'. We'll put the hosses away, and look arter things around the house."

As Mrs. Allstrup led the way up-stairs, there seemed to be nothing in the house to raise any apprehension in the mind of Eva, though she could not help fearing that it was to be in some sort a prison for her.

If Ben Stanniford or Fred Henning were responsible for her abduction, and if that house was the destination they intended for her, she was sure that they would have been there to meet her, that they would not have left her in the dark so long.

As it was not they, who could it be, and for what purpose had she been brought there?

There was nothing the matter with the house, as far as she could see, nor was there any disposition on the part of anybody to ill-treat her or show her any disrespect.

Thus there was nothing for her to do but to take things as she found them, to keep her mind and body sound and strong, and to wait and watch for opportunities to learn something or do something.

Of course it was necessary that she should have rest, and she was glad when the frowsy-headed woman introduced her into the room which she was to occupy.

It was a small and plain room with one window, not neat, and not particularly untidy, with no furniture but a corded bedstead with its bedding, one chair, and a cheap little looking-glass.

Eva remarked that she would like to have a wash-bowl and pitcher, and the woman, setting her candlestick on the window-sill, stepped into an adjoining room and brought what was needed.

"You had better lay right down and go to sleep, miss," said she, "and I hope you'll sleep well."

"Wait a moment, Mrs. Allstrup," said Eva, as the woman turned to leave the room. "I want to ask you a question."

"How'd you know my name?"

"Perhaps I guessed it. Will you tell me where I am and why I have been brought here?"

"I don't know nothin' about it, miss, but I reckon it's all right. Thar ain't nobody goin' to hurt you, as far as I know."

Mrs. Allstrup left the room hastily, as if to avoid further questioning, and turned the key in the door on the outside.

This looked something like prison practice; but Eva speedily discovered, by examining the lock, that the part into which the bolt shot was so loose that she could easily remove the screws.

Consequently that room, at least, need not be a prison for her.

Removing her hat and shawl, she knelt down and prayed briefly, commending herself to the care of her Father in Heaven.

Then she extinguished the candle, as it would not burn much longer, and laid herself on the bed without undressing.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE OBSTREPEROUS MAJOR.

EVA BRAMWELL did not succeed in getting any restful slumber during the remainder of the night, though she needed it and wished for it.

The exciting event of her capture, and the perplexity of her position, kept her wakeful, and all her efforts to calm herself and dismiss the subject from her mind were unavailing.

There was something else that troubled her, too, something that was calculated to add to her uneasiness a feeling of fear.

Every now and then, in her fitful sleep and in her waking moments, she heard doleful groans, as of a person in extreme agony—groans which she located at a little distance from her apartment, and which filled her with both pity and alarm.

These noises continued through the night, and of course tended to increase her wakefulness.

After a series of cat-naps that were of little value to her, she was rejoiced to see the gray light of morning come in at the window, and thought it advisable to get up and rest.

Thankful for a chance to freshen herself up after a restless night, she washed her hands and face in the water that Mrs. Allstrup had brought, though she had no comb, and a towel had been omitted from the articles that were furnished to her.

Then she seated herself on the one chair, and looked out of the window for a little while.

She found nothing there to interest her—nothing but an unpleasing prospect of uncultivated fields, with a gloomy background of woods and hills, which the rising sun had not yet lighted up.

Again she heard the groans, which had ceased for an hour or more, and she was curious to know who the sufferer was and what was the cause of his suffering.

She also wished to go and examine the house, if not the grounds, with the possibility of happening on a way of escape.

If she should find a way open, she had decided on leaving the house, as she could not help believing that if her captors meant well by her, they would have made their intentions clear.

She would go, if she got away, not to Staceyville, as that would hardly be ladylike or modest, but to the house of Betty Marks, where she would be sure to find friends.

So she proceeded to get out of the room in which she was supposed to be confined.

It was an easy matter to remove the part of the lock which she had discovered to be loose, and then she turned back the bolt, took out the key, concealed it on her person, and replaced the piece which she had removed.

As she stepped out into the little hall at the head of the stairs, closing the door behind her, she perceived that the door of a room nearly opposite to her own was partly open, and that the groans which she had heard proceeded from that room.

They began again when she walked out, and it was evident that the occupant of the room had heard her light footfalls or her manipulations of the door, as he called her in a plaintive and pleading tone.

"Who is there? Is that you, Mrs. Allstrup? Whoever it is, please come and help me. I need help right now."

It was a man's voice, weak and pitiful as it was, and Eva fancied that she recognized it.

Probably it was the person whom Mrs. Allstrup had mentioned as the major, and whom she had alluded to as having lately been "obstreperous."

Curiosity mingled with pity in Eva's mind, and she stepped lightly into the room from which the groans had proceeded.

Yes, she did know the man who lay there helpless, his hands clutching the bed-clothes and his face turned toward her as she came in, with a look of painful and woeful entreaty.

Thin and wan and haggard as he was, she recognized him as Major Stacey, whom she had seen more than once at her uncle's house, and of whose unfortunate complication with Fred Henning she had heard from Tom and his father.

He spoke to her as soon as she came in, still in that weak and pitiful voice, and with a longing in his tone and look which she could not understand.

She could not understand it, simply because she did not know what it was to have a stomach that was afflicted with a morbid and intense craving for liquor.

"Please give me my medicine," he entreated. "You will find it in the closet over there. It is all right—nothing but a bottle of whisky. The doctor said that I must take a little every hour; but Mrs. Allstrup has not been near me in a long time, and I can't get up to help myself."

As a matter of fact, the physician who was attending him had interdicted the use of liquor, and had concealed the bottle; but the major had been sharp enough to note where it had been hid.

The physician, who was also a Stacey, being well acquainted with his patient, knew that though the whisky might give him temporary relief, it would eventually do him more harm than good, besides interfering with the action of the medicine that had been administered to him.

So the major, perceiving a stranger in the house, who was unaware of those regulations, deliberately set himself at work to induce her to give him what he had been ordered not to have.

Eva went to the closet and brought out the bottle, which she gave to the patient after removing the cork.

The major put it to his mouth, and proceeded to suck it with a frenzy of thirst, until she was compelled to use a little force in taking it from him.

"You are drinking a great deal of it," she said, "and I am sure that cannot be right. You must give me the bottle."

The liquor seemed not only to quiet him, but to tone up his body and brain.

"That's right," he answered quietly. "Put it away. I can go to sleep now."

But he did not go to sleep. Instead of that, he turned his head, and stared intently at his visitor.

"I know you," he said. "You are Bramwell Stacey's niece. How did you come here?"

Eva told him in a few words the story of her abduction.

"That is Bramwell Stacey's doing," he exclaimed. "I am sure of that. No doubt of that in the world. It is part of the game he is playing. He is a villain, a black-hearted scoundrel. It was he who put me up to pick a quarrel with that river man, and he urged me to go

on when he knew it would be sure death to me. When I fell, prostrated in body and mind, shattered by something over which I had no control, I was picked up as if I was no better than a nigger, instead of being taken to Bramwell Stacey's house to be nursed and cared for, and was carted away to this infernal hole, where I am treated worse than a State Prison convict. Oh, Bramwell Stacey is a black hearted villain, and I will live to expose him and get even with him yet."

"I am very sorry for you," said Eva, who understood but little of the invalid's complaint against his cousin.

"And now, poor child, he has been playing one of his rascally games against you. I don't know for certain what it means, but am sure that it means harm to you. He don't play such games for nothing."

"What am I to do?" inquired Eva, thoroughly frightened by these ominous words. "I must get away from here."

"So you shall, my poor child. You just stay around here, and step into my room now and then to give me my medicine, and when night comes I will show you how to get away from here without any trouble. Trust me for that."

Eva did not know that this was merely the scheme of a victim of alcohol, by which he hoped to secure for himself a continual supply of the stimulant he wanted, and she was so encouraged by the promise given her, that she was willing to wait patiently for the night.

This determination was afterward made stronger by the discovery that all the ways of egress were guarded.

There was a heavy step in the hall, and Mrs. Allstrup entered the room.

She was manifestly surprised and alarmed at finding Eva with the invalid.

"You here, miss?" she exclaimed. "How did you git in here?"

"I walked in, of course," answered Eva, "just as you did."

"How did you git out of your room, then?"

"I merely walked out. You need not think of locking me up, Mrs. Allstrup. I go and come as I please. Doors and locks are nothing to me."

"It looks like it, sure enough. Whar's the key of your room?"

"A witch hung it on her broomstick last night and flew away with it."

"That beats me. Well, miss, I reckon you can have the run of the house if you want it; but you needn't try to get outside."

Mrs. Allstrup turned her attention to the invalid.

"How are you gittin' on, major?" she asked.

"Very nicely," he answered, with no sign of his recent wildness and agitation.

"Gracious sakes! and so you are. Do you know what's come over him, miss?"

"The young lady has had a very soothing effect upon me," said the major, answering for Eva.

"That's most astonishin'. It looks like some sort of witchcraft. Why, miss, last night he was so obstreperous that we was afraid we'd have to tie him down. Hain't he been seein' no snakes, nor men chasin' him, nor nothin' like that?"

"Nothing of the kind," answered Eva. "He has been as gentle as a lamb since I came in here."

"It's a wonder. Well, miss, you ain't goin' to be locked up no more; but, if you'll go back to your room and wait thar while I fix up the old gentleman, I'll come in arter a bit and take you down to breakfast."

Eva readily complied with this request, as she had decided that she would make no attempt to escape until night, trusting to the promise of the nearly insane Major Stacey.

"She soon discovered, as has been stated, that the house was carefully guarded, and that she was closely watched.

Therefore she occupied the day mainly in eating and sleeping, with occasional excursions to Major Stacey's room, hoping to get strength to endure the trials that might be before her.

CHAPTER XXIX.

JAKE TOLLIVER'S VIGILS.

THERE were some points connected with the intentions of the Staceys which they had overlooked, or which had not turned out exactly as they had wished them to, and this statement is made without any allusion to the serious events, so disastrous to them, which had occurred, or were to occur, at Staceyville.

Dr. Randolph Stacey, the physician who was attending the major, came to visit him in the morning, and Mrs. Allstrup accompanied him up-stairs.

They found the patient sleeping soundly, and his sleep was apparently restful and healthful.

Doctors do not know everything, and the ignorance of some of them is amazing, when we consider how much is trusted to them.

In this case there was nobody to help Dr. Randolph Stacey to a diagnosis, and he did not guess that innocent Eva had been supplying his patient pretty freely with the forbidden stimulant.

"This is much better than I had expected,"

he said as he felt the wrist of the slumbering major. "He is sleeping well, and he has developed a mild perspiration, which is a good symptom, and his pulse is much stronger than it was. He is really getting on better than we could have hoped for, Mrs. Allstrup, and my remedies have had a good effect. Can you tell me when he began to improve?"

"He was powerful bad the realy part of last night; but this morning that young lady came in, and he picked up wonderful."

"What young lady?"

Mrs. Allstrup told of Eva Bramwell's arrival, and of her visit to the invalid, not forgetting about the "witchcraft" way in which Eva had got out of her room when the door was locked.

"The major said that the young lady had a soothin' effect onto him," she remarked.

Dr. Randolph Stacey hummed and hawed and looked wise.

"We physicians read," said he, "that there are some persons who exert a sort of magnetic influence upon other persons, and perhaps it may be true, though I have never met a case of the kind. In this instance my remedies have been judiciously prepared, and I trust that they have been carefully administered, and therefore we see this improvement in the patient. You may leave off the nervine in the small bottle, but may continue to give him the mixture in the big bottle, and, perhaps, Mrs. Allstrup, you may as well let that young lady come in here to visit him as often as she cares to."

It may be permitted to the historian of the Stacey war to remark that "jackleg" physicians are not confined to the Stacey family or to the State of Mississippi. They are indigenous, and crop out in many places.

It was very well for Dr. Randolph Stacey to plume himself upon the effect of his remedies and general treatment; but the plain truth was that the apparently-improved condition of the patient was due to Eva Bramwell's injudicious but innocent use of the whisky bottle.

Of course the improvement was only temporary, and when the reaction set in—as toppers say, when the whisky "died in him"—then something else might be expected.

Bramwell Stacey could not have supposed that any such development would follow Eva's arrival at the lone house in the hills, nor could he have guessed that the captive who had escaped from the trunk-room in his house would have closely followed Eva and her abductors, with the intention of making all the mischief he could for her benefit.

Jake Tolliver had no difficulty in following the party, as he trotted easily at a little distance behind them, taking to the woods or behind a fence when there was danger that they might look back and see him.

If they did look back, they failed to see him, and he followed safely and silently to the house in the Staghead Hills, a region with which he was thoroughly acquainted.

When he got there, he could not see his way clear to serve the young lady, or even to get near her for the purpose of learning whether she wanted his help.

Each door of the house was guarded by an armed man, and another walked about the building as a patrol.

This might not have prevented the vagabond from effecting an entrance, if he could have located the room that was occupied by the young lady; but he had no means of reaching a conclusion on that point.

There were lights in two of the upper rooms on opposite sides of the house; but there was no telling which was Miss Bramwell's, and it would not do for Jake to get shut up in the house and arouse the wrong party.

He watched the house closely, but without learning anything further that interested him, until he was inwardly admonished that he needed food and rest.

Though he had expected to go to Charley Taintor's hotel in Staceyville for his supper, he had brought away from there some scraps of bread and meat, to serve him in an emergency, or to help him pass the time.

The emergency had arrived, and the scraps had all been eaten, and he had not the wherewithal to satisfy his hunger.

Jake Tolliver, however, was not a lad who would go hungry when there was provender within the reach of an enterprising grasp.

There was a hen-house on the premises, and there were fowls in the hen-house.

There was one less in the hen-house after Jake left it.

He took his chicken to a hollow, well out of the way of the house, where he picked and cleaned it, and cooked it at a fire he built, after a fashion of his own.

Having satisfied his appetite with part of the food, he stowed the remainder in his ragged garments, and suffered himself to drop into a snooze that served him as well as a long nap would have done.

He had supposed that in the small hours of the morning, or in the dark and drowsy time shortly before daylight, the vigilance of the sentries at the house might be relaxed, and he crept about the house to see whether there might be

a chance for him to get inside without danger of discovery; but he found no such chance.

The sentries were still on duty, and were apparently as wakeful as ever.

Jake waited until morning, when he at last got a little encouragement.

He saw Eva Bramwell seated at the window of one of the rooms which had been lighted the previous night.

He was unable to attract her attention, and it would probably have been of no advantage to him if he could have done so, as she did not know who he was or anything about him, and he could not explain himself at a distance.

A more impracticable place to get at than that house, he was obliged to admit, he had seldom seen.

It stood alone and bare, with no outbuildings near it, nor any trees, nor even as much as a vine or a shrub.

It was impossible for him to reach the upper windows, and equally impossible to get in at the lower windows in daylight, and the house was continually watched, the doors being guarded with special care.

Jake considered the question whether it would be possible for him to go to Staceyville and report to Mr. Henning, and get back by dark, and he was soon forced to the conclusion that he could not begin to do it.

Anyhow, he meant to get the young lady away from there at night, if she were willing to go, and that would be the best way of reporting to his employer.

During the day he finished his chicken, and caught and cooked another one that was inconsiderately straying about.

He was not likely to suffer with hunger as long as there was anything eatable going around on two legs, or even on four, and it would be a smart bird or beast that could get away from him.

At the same time he did not fail to keep a watchful eye upon the house, to note any changes that might take place there.

There was no visible change, and at last the night came, when he must use his shrewdest and best endeavors in the task which he had undertaken.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE SPY'S SUPREME EFFORT.

IT was about as easy to get into the house after dark as in the daylight—that is to say, about equally impossible.

Jake Tolliver tried the lower windows, eluding the vigilance of the patrol to do so, but only succeeded in discovering that they were nailed down, and there was no chance to climb to the upper ones.

But there was something in the way of strategy that he could do, and he had already decided upon what that should be, in the event of failure of other means.

At a little distance from the front of the house was a wooded hollow, and thither the vagabond turned his steps.

He built and lighted there a brush fire, and, as soon as it was started, he hastened away from the spot, going as near to the house as he could get and keep under cover.

There he waited and watched, and the effect of his strategy was soon apparent.

The fire in the hollow blazed up, and naturally attracted the attention of the guards, as it was something so peculiar and causeless and out of place, that they could not even guess why or by whom it was made.

The patrol came around and spoke to the man at the front door, asking him if he had noticed the light, and what he supposed it meant.

"Of course I've noticed it," answered the guard; "but I hain't got the least idea what it means. As you're about here, Sam, I've a mind to run over thar and see what makes the light."

"Reckon you'd better, as it may mean some deviltry, and we ought to know all that goes on near this house."

The guard hastened down to the hollow, and the other man stood around a corner of the house and watched him, being extremely anxious to learn the meaning of that strange light.

This was Jake Tolliver's opportunity, just what he had been working and waiting for, and he at once availed himself of it.

Creeping to the other corner of the house, he slid around it silently, reached the front door, opened it, sneaked inside, and closed it softly behind him.

The guard who had gone down to the hollow soon returned to his post looking puzzled and solemn.

"What was it?" inquired his comrades.

"Durned if I understand it yet. I found a brush fire down thar, but nothin' else. If thar'd been anybody near it, I'd soon have found out what it meant; but thar wasn't the least sign of the feller who started it, and that beats me."

"Reckon we'll have to give it up, Joe."

"It's a conundrum that I can't begin to guess. Somebody or somethin' is around that don't ought to be, and we'll have to watch closer than ever—that's all."

"That reminds me, Joe, that somethin' queer

happened here just now, or I imagined it—I wouldn't swear which."

"What was that?"

"I had been watchin' the light in the holler, but chanced to turn my head toward the house, and I thought I saw a dog slip in at the front door."

"A dog? You must be crazy, Sam. The door was shut when I left here, and it is shut now. No dog could open and shut that door."

"A dog could shut it, anyhow, and what I saw looked like a dog, if I saw anythin'."

"I reckon the queer thing is in your head. But it may be that somethin' went in thar. That fire in the holler was mighty suspicious. Reckon we'd better go through the house, Sam, and see if thar's anythin' out o' the way thar."

This was agreed to, and the two comrades silently entered the house and began their investigations.

Jake Tolliver in the mean time was attending to business to the best of his ability and with the greatest possible celerity.

When he had closed the door, he found himself in darkness, there being no lights in the lower part of the house at that hour of the night.

Having kept in his mind the location of Eva Bramwell's room, he stole quietly up the stairway, with the intention of arousing her, if that should be necessary, and speaking to her.

He had scarcely reached the head of the stairs, when she started to cross the hall from Major Stacey's room to her own room.

She had looked in there to see if the invalid wanted anything, and had found him, to all appearances, sleeping tranquilly.

By the light that came from the major's apartment before she closed the door she caught sight of the ragged and uncouth Jake Tolliver, and with difficulty suppressed a scream that rose to her lips.

She was not afraid, only startled.

Jake hastened to do his best to reassure her.

"Miss Bram'll," he whispered, "Jest wait a minnit. I've got suthin' to say."

By a strong effort she controlled herself and allowed him to approach her.

The first words he spoke made her glad that she had not raised an alarm.

"Mr. Hennin' sent me, miss. You know him?"

"Mr. Fred Henning? Yes. How did he send you, and why?"

"He told me to watch Bram'll Stacey's house and look arter you. I've been hangin' around thar ever sence, and when you was kerried off, I follered. I'm Jake Tolliver."

This was good news for Eva. The name of Fred Henning at once inspired her with confidence, and the vagabond became to her an angel in disguise, though it must be admitted that Jake's appearance was not in the faintest degree suggestive of the angel.

"Step into my room," she said. "Somebody might see or hear you out here."

Jake followed her into her room, and she closed the door; but he still did not raise his voice above a whisper.

"Dar ain't no time to talk, miss. Dis house is watched mighty cluss, an' I jest did manage to sneak in, arter waitin' sence last night. 'Twas Bram'll Stacey, miss, dat made 'em kerry you off. I saw an' heerd it all, an' I know 'twas a put-up job."

"I believe you. What am I to do?"

"Jest wait a bit till I'm sure that everythin's quiet, an' den I'll show you how to sneak out o' dis house, an' I'll take you to Staceyville, whar you'll be all right."

Everything was not quiet then. In fact, there was a big racket in the house just at that moment.

"What does that mean?" exclaimed Eva as she started back in terror.

Jake did not know; but he stepped quickly to the door to listen.

Joe and Sam, the guards who had started the investigation, explored the lower part of the house, but found nothing suspicious there, though they lighted a candle and examined every corner.

Then they went up higher, and at the head of the stairs they encountered something that had not entered into their calculations.

Eva Bramwell had not been able to feed Major Stacey with any more whisky, because the contents of his "medicine" bottle in the closet were exhausted.

Consequently she was much pleased, when she looked in at his room, to see that he was apparently sleeping well.

The truth was, however, that the liquor had died in him, and he was then on the verge of a delirious attack.

Awaking from a frightful dream, he heard the men on the stairs, and the sound became a part of his fancies, and his frenzy gave him a convulsive strength that was wonderful, considering his previous condition.

He sprung from his bed, clad only in a single garment, dashed open the door, and rushed out into the hall, with a yell that would have done credit to a Comanche.

The two guards were surprised at seeing that this helpless invalid left the bed from which he

had not arisen since he was brought to the house, but were more than surprised when he attacked them with a force and a violence which they could not possibly have expected from him.

"They are here!" he screamed as he rushed forth from his room. "The fiends that have been chasing me are here at last, and they mean to cut me into giblets. But I defy them, and I will meet them face to face and foot to foot!"

He threw himself upon the two men who were on the stairs, and the fury of his onset was such that he nearly tumbled them down to the lower floor.

They recovered themselves, and, quickly perceiving what was the matter with him, put forth their best exertions to subdue him and force him back to his room.

The struggle was a severe one, as they were at a disadvantage by reason of their position, and the major fought with supernatural strength and the ferocity of a maniac.

While the guards were thus engaged, and were having all they could attend to, something dropped upon them and over them, passing so lightly and swiftly that they could not pause to notice what it was.

It was Jake Tolliver.

The vagabond had quickly perceived that he was sure to be discovered if he remained where he was, and he saw in the struggle on the stairs a chance to get himself out of the way.

He leaped from the upper landing like a dog, alighting on the shoulders of one of the guards, whence he slid to the stairs, and was at the bottom in an instant.

Mrs. Allstrup, who had heard the racket, and had hastened from her room to see what was the matter, was knocked over by the lad as he reached the lower floor, and for a short space of time took no further interest in the excitement.

The third guard had also heard the racket, and had hurried around to take a hand in the game, opening the door just as the vagabond got down.

Jake leaped at him instantly, with his head lowered for butting, struck the man in the stomach, and laid him sprawling on the ground outside.

In a moment, however, the man was up, and was looking around for his assailant.

Catching sight of Jake as he scudded like a rabbit across the open ground, he raised his rifle, and fired at the retreating figure.

The lad felt a sharp twinge in his left arm, which only made him run the faster until he got to cover and was out of the reach of bullets.

Seating himself on a rock to get a little rest, he perceived that his ragged garments were soaked with blood, and that he was weak and dizzy.

He was bleeding, in fact, like a stuck pig, from a bad bullet wound in his arm, and no time was to be lost if he was not to bleed to death.

He bared his arm, and bound up the wound as well as he could with his assortment of rags.

Then he rested a while, eating some of the chicken he had saved, while he considered what it would be best for him to do.

His chance of assisting Eva Bramwell to escape, or of serving her in any way, seemed to be gone.

It was not likely that he would be able to get into that house again after what had happened there, and, even if he should, he would be too badly disabled by his wound to be of any use.

Therefore there was nothing left him but to make his way to Staceyville, if possible, and report to Fred Henning the events he had witnessed.

He worked his way around to the road, and began his journey, which proved to be a tedious and difficult one, as he found himself very weak from loss of blood and the pain of his tightly bandaged wound.

Do the best he could, his progress was terribly slow, as he was compelled every now and then to stop to rest.

When the morning broke, he was not more than half way to Staceyville; but he resolutely plodded on, until the sun was well up into the sky, and until he could positively go no further.

One last, despairing effort he made to stagger forward, but all was darkness about him then, and he reeled and fell senseless on the grass at the roadside.

CHAPTER XXXI.

FOES FACE TO FACE AGAIN.

FRED HENNING and his friends did not rest on their laurels after their final and signal victory over the Staceyites, nor did they suffer any grass to grow under their feet.

As soon as Fred had informed her of the answer that had been wrung from Colonel Jeff Stacey, Betty Marks insisted that an expedition should be at once organized to search the Staghead Hills for Eva Bramwell.

Ben Stanniford earnestly supported this demand, and Flush Fred was quite as willing as anybody else to begin the search for the missing girl.

Neither of them had got any rest during the night; but its rapid and stirring events had excited them so that in the early morning they were as wakeful and active as ever.

Fred Henning, however, realized the fact that the men who had worked and fought there nearly all night would need rest, as they were not as intensely interested in the recovery of Eva Bramwell as he and Ben were, and therefore when he called for volunteers he addressed himself to the last arrivals, the mounted men who had come with Betty Marks.

He easily got all he wanted, and Jim Maybie insisted on accompanying the party, declaring that if there were any more points to be made against the Staceys he wanted to be on hand to help make them.

Betty Marks would have gone with them too, but Henning fairly compelled her to return home, promising her that Eva, if she could be recovered, would be at once brought to her house.

If Eva Bramwell had really disappeared from her uncle's house, and there seemed to be no longer any doubt of that, there could be no question as to whom her disappearance was due, and it was to be supposed that, wherever she might be, she was closely guarded.

The power of the Staceys, too, though seriously weakened, had not been shattered, and there were still plenty of the tribe in the neighborhood.

Therefore Flush Fred felt that he was justified in taking a sufficient force to meet emergencies.

Charley Taintor amply supplied the party with provisions for the expedition, and they set out from Staceyville a little after daylight, believing that the blow they intended should be struck as soon as possible.

As all of them, with the exception of the two strangers, knew the Staghead Hills, and some were intimately acquainted with that region, it was expected that the search would be thorough, and that Eva Bramwell would be found, if she had really been taken thither.

They rode until the sun was well up in the sky, when an unexpected discovery caused a halt.

On the grass at the roadside, and under the shadow of some bushes, lay something which was at first supposed to be a dead or sleeping dog, but which was soon perceived to be a human being, though a very ragged one.

Those who dismounted to examine that inert object quickly discovered what and who it was.

Flush Fred, who was one of those who dismounted, was more than surprised when he saw in that huddled-up mass of humanity mixed with rags, his hired spy, Jake Tolliver.

The presence of the lad there accounted for his absence from Staceyville; but how had he got there, and what was the matter with him?

The latter question was at once answered when it was seen that his rags were bloody, and that the bandage on his arm covered a bullet wound.

As he was believed to be living, efforts were made to revive him, whisky being the handy restorative that was used, and after awhile they were successful.

Jake Tolliver opened his eyes, sat up, supported by Jim Maybie, and was soon able to speak, though feebly and faintly.

He was overjoyed at finding Fred Henning there, and exerted himself to tell his story.

It was hard work, and he was frequently cautioned not to go too fast or try to do too much; but he continued until he had given Fred a pretty clear idea of what had happened since the meeting at Judge Stacey's house.

He also gave a description, which was recognized by more than one of the party, of the house in the hills in which Eva Bramwell was a prisoner, and where he had met his last adventure and received his wound.

As they thus knew where to go and what to do, the object of the expedition was greatly simplified.

The lad's wound was bound up as well as circumstances would allow, and he was fortified with food and drink, after which, by the order of Fred Henning, he was carefully mounted on a horse with one of the men, whose instructions were to take him to Staceyville and procure for him the best medical aid and attendance to be had there.

Having disposed of Jake as well as they could, the party rode forward briskly and cheerfully, thankful that their way had been so unexpectedly opened for them.

Ben Stanniford was in high spirits, hoping that he would soon recover the lady of his love, and make an end of her troubles and his own with no more difficulty.

Jim Maybie was jubilant in the belief that he was going to aid in striking the Staceys another telling blow.

It was supposed by all that if Eva Bramwell could be got away from Judge Stacey, and he could be removed from the control of her property, he would soon be a ruined man, and through him the power of the Stacey tribe would be broken.

It was not yet noon when they reached the point, well known to several of the party, where the by-path or lane that led to the Allstrup house branched off from the main road.

Just before they got there they found themselves confronted by another party of mounted men, who had come down the road from the

opposite direction, with the apparent intention of also turning off into the lane.

It did not need a near view to assure Flush Fred and his friends that the other party was composed of Staceyites, led by Judge Stacey and Colonel Jeff.

Such was the case, and there was a good reason for their presence there at that hour.

The last mentioned hero, when he came to his senses after his rough experience with the rope and the Juneapple tree, succeeded without much difficulty in freeing his hands from the cord that tied them.

His hands then did the same service for his feet, and he did not lose a moment's time in climbing the fence and getting away from the vicinity of the hotel.

Before he reached his friends, who were soon badly scattered and rather difficult to get at, it occurred to him that the truth had been squeezed out of him, at least to a limited extent.

He had not been so far gone when he feebly answered Flush Fred's last question as to have been unaware of the fact that he had mentioned Staghead Hills, thus giving the enemy the information that was wanted.

This was a grievous fault, and grievously did Colonel Jeff answer it to himself.

Yet it was the fault of exhausted nature, rather than of his will, and the information had been literally squeezed out of him by torture.

As soon as he could find Judge Stacey he rendered to the chief of the clan a full account of his capture and the subsequent proceedings which had resulted in the partial disclosure he made.

The importance of that disclosure was fully appreciated by Bramwell Stacey, who perceived that there was no time to be lost in counteracting the effect of the harm that had been done.

As the last defeat of the Stacey faction had put success in that quarter out of the question, at least for the present, and as his possession of the person and property of his niece and ward was an indispensable element of his plans, it became necessary to take immediate steps to remove her out of the reach of his enemies.

Fully appreciating the enterprise of Fred Henning and his allies, Judge Stacey perceived that his action must be speedy and vigorous, or they might steal a march on him.

If they should go to Staghead Hills, they would probably go in force, and it would be necessary for him to take a sufficient force to provide for the emergency of meeting them.

Thus it happened that he encountered the enemy, just in the nick of time, at the point where the road to the Allstrup house branched off from the main road.

CHAPTER XXXII.

ONE WAY TO SETTLE IT.

So the opposing forces faced each other at the mouth of the lane, both mounted and armed.

You have seen, in some of the stage representations of Shakespeare's plays, the opposition armies, each composed of half a dozen supers, march on from the wings, face each other, and march off, and afterward there was a big racket behind the scenes, to indicate the progress of a terrific fight.

Well, the Staceyites and the Independents were not that kind of people, and they did not do business in that way.

Yet they faced each other, and stared blankly at each other, as if they did not know what to do with the predicament in which they found themselves.

The truth was that the meeting at that place and time was entirely unexpected, though an encounter of some sort had been considered possible.

Furthermore, those men were foemen who had tried each other's steel, and knew how it would cut, and therefore were none too anxious to have another whack at it.

Yet there they were, each party evidently aiming for the same point, and neither of them able to get there without the permission of the other, which of course would not be granted.

How was this unexpected and very inconvenient problem to be solved?

Both sides were pretty near equal in numbers, and both were equally obstinate and determined.

It looked as if nothing but a bloody battle would decide which of them should have access to the house they both desired to reach.

In preparation for such an event, they dismounted, put their horses out of harm's reach, and each side threw out pickets along the course of the lane, to make sure that the other side should not steal a march on them by sneaking across to the Allstrup house.

Thus matters presented a very belligerent appearance, when a new aspect was given to the affair by a flag of truce.

It came from the Stacey side, and was brought by Colonel Jeff, who seemed to be then in a good condition physically, though he was mentally inclined to revenge and all manner of viciousness.

He halted about midway between the opposing forces, and was met there by Fred Henning and Jim Maybie.

"Glad to see you looking so well, colonel," remarked Fred, in a friendly manner.

"Oh, I'm all right," answered the recently suspended man, "and I reckon I will have a chance to hang you before long."

"You needn't trouble yourself about that, colonel. If you should happen to want to get the truth out of me, I will give it right up, without any sort of a squeeze."

"Suppose you pitch in, then, and tell me why you are here with your crowd."

"I have no objection to telling you that. We are here for the purpose of seeing and rescuing Miss Eva Bramwell, who is a prisoner in a house up yonder."

"How do you know that she is there?"

"You kindly informed me, colonel, that she had been taken to the Staghead Hills, and since then I have learned just where she is and what has happened to her."

"Who told you that?"

"A lad whom I sent to watch and look after her. He saw her when she was carried away from Bramwell Stacey's place, and knew who was responsible for that deed. He followed her and her three captors to the house up yonder, where he had the misfortune to be wounded by one of your friends."

"So you think you have got it down fine. What do you mean to do about it?"

"I have told you what we intend to do."

"Of course you understand that we don't intend to allow you to do anything of the kind. Judge Stacey has instructed me to say to you, though, that he don't want any more fighting. There has been too much of that, in his opinion."

"I am glad that he has come to that conclusion, colonel. All he has to do, then, is to get out of the way and let us go on to the house up yonder."

"You know, Mr. Henning; that he is the guardian of his niece, and you can't expect that he will let you take her out of his care."

"She would be much better off to be out of such care as he has been giving her here, and such as he wants to give her."

"He don't happen to think so. But he is willing to make a compromise."

"Very well. Any compromise will be acceptable to us that will stop the fighting, and will at the same time insure Miss Bramwell's safety and prevent her from being forced to do anything against her will. What sort of a compromise is Judge Stacey willing to make?"

"You are said to be a mighty good card-player," observed Colonel Jeff.

This looked like a sudden and uncalled-for change of the subject; but Flush Fred, quick-witted as ever, did not believe that it was so intended, and he wondered what the remark was meant to lead up to.

"I can play cards," he answered.

"Poker is your stronghold, I've heard," continued Jeff.

"I think I know how to play poker."

"There's one of our men, Cousin 'Bijah Stacey, who thinks he can handle the pictures right peart, and who has made somethin' of a name about here by beatin' everybody in these parts at freeze-out. What Cousin Bramwell proposes is that you and 'Bijah shall play a game of freeze-out to decide about Eva. If you win, the judge will give up his claim to her. If 'Bijah wins, you and your friend shall go away from here and leave us alone."

If Fred Henning's decision had depended on himself alone, he would have jumped at this offer, which seemed to him to be the softest thing he had dropped on inside of the State of Mississippi.

He had not the least doubt of his ability to best 'Bijah Stacey or any other citizen of that country at freeze-out or any game that could be proposed.

As for the possibility of "roots" being played on him, that was out of the question.

"What do you say?" demanded Colonel Jeff.

"Ain't that fair and square?"

"It seems to be," answered Fred, "and it suits me well enough; but I must consult my friend."

"All right. Go and talk it over with him, and let me know when my answer is ready."

"Where could the game be played?" inquired Fred.

"There is a deserted cabin a little way from here, not toward the Allstrup house, but on the other side of the way, that will be handy enough."

Flush Fred had some misgivings as to how the proposed arrangement would strike Ben Stanniford, when he went back to report to his friends, who were anxiously waiting to learn the nature of the interview.

His misgivings were justified by Ben's attitude.

That young gentleman was at first seriously displeased, regarding it as nothing less than an indignity that anybody should propose to decide the fate of his lady love by the chance or otherwise of a game of cards, and he declared that nothing could induce him to consent to it.

The other members of the party, however, with the solitary exception of Jim Maybie, who was as hot-headed and heavy-handed as ever,

had got enough of fighting, and were more than willing to consent to any settlement that would bring "peace with honor."

As the fighting prospects must depend on them, their opinion was necessarily a weighty one.

Fred Henning, too, averred that he was delighted with the prospect of settling the dispute quietly and easily.

He was sure that the settlement must be such as would suit Ben and himself, as he considered his victory over 'Bijah Stacey a sure thing, and his only wonder was that the other side should have been soft enough to propose such a contest.

Ben Stanniford was not easily convinced.

He did not believe in suare things, and he was decidedly of the opinion that the Staceys would never have made such a proposition unless they had some concealed trick which they meant to spring on their adversaries to their utter discomfiture.

In fact, he was sure that there must be "a nigger in the woodpile," and he would rather risk his life in an attempt to rescue Eva, than trust to the insidious offers of the enemy.

It would be necessary, however, to risk more lives than his own, and the owners of those lives were quite disinclined to throw them away when there was a reasonable and apparently equitable chance of saving them.

They were unable to see any "nigger in the woodpile," and believed that it would be soon enough to fight when their adversaries showed a disposition to cheat them or play them false.

With any underhand game, either of trickery or of violence, they considered themselves fully able to cope.

So Ben Stanniford, being out-argued, as well as overborne by the majority, yielded his opinions, and consented to the settlement of the question by a game of freeze-out.

Flush Fred thereupon raised a flag of truce, and he and Jim Maybie met Colonel Jeff Stacey and another between the lines.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

A GAME OF FREEZE-OUT.

THE details of the proposed method of settling the dispute were easily arranged, and proved to be quite simple.

Abijah Stacey was to be accompanied to the scene of the contest by two of his friends, and Flush Fred would take two friends, the four to remain and watch the game, for the purpose of seeing that the champion of each side had fair play.

Henning took with him Jim Maybie and Ben Stanniford, as men upon whom he could rely in any emergency, and with 'Bijah were the inevitable Colonel Jeff and another.

The six men proceeded to the place agreed upon, and the comrades whom they had left behind busied themselves with satisfying their appetites, which had by that time become pretty sharp set.

A few men, however, were detailed from each party to loiter about in the direction taken by the champions, to see that there should be no foul play or interference.

The others, especially on the side of the Independents, kept their weapons close to them, ready at a moment's notice to start up and begin fighting if it should be necessary.

The deserted cabin was within easy gunshot distance of the mouth of the lane near which the opposing forces were posted, and there was surely nothing suspicious about it.

It would have been possible to lay an ambush in the vicinity; but Flush Fred had guarded against that by sending a reliable man in advance as a scout.

If there had been any such danger, the alarm would have been instantly given.

The champion from the river curiously examined 'Bijah Stacey as soon as he met him.

He saw a middle-aged man, of small stature and light weight, a lean and dried-up little fellow, with a decidedly courttrified appearance as to his dress and features and actions.

It seemed to Flush Fred that such a man was not to be feared by him, physically or mentally or otherwise.

Yet he knew that in many instances just such green and insignificant-looking countrymen had vanquished in various games some of the most skillful players, and therefore even 'Bijah Stacey was not to be despised as an antagonist.

The deserted cabin, though it had evidently not been used of late, was not dilapidated, and looked as if its former inhabitants might have expected to return to it, as the single room below contained a cheap table and a few chairs, together with a corded bedstead.

In that room the six men disposed of themselves as suited them, the two champions taking seats at the table, and the others sitting or standing about as they chose.

Jim Maybie and Ben Stanniford were as watchful as cats, and, if there should be any sign of foul play, they might be depended on to notice it and guard against it.

A question arose concerning the cards that should be used.

Flush Fred, who was never without the tools of his trade, brought out an unopened pack, and 'Bijah, as if the contingency had been foreseen and provided for, produced a similar pack.

The question which cards should be used was decided by tossing a coin, and the Stacey side won.

"Fred Henning carefully examined his adversary's pack, satisfying himself that there was nothing the matter with it, and the game began, after each side had placed on the table the amount of money to which the freeze-out contest was limited.

Beyond that limit there could of course be no betting, and the man who first "went broke" would lose the game.

As the window and the door of the cabin were wide open, there was plenty of light for the gamblers and the watchers.

Scarcely was the game begun when Flush Fred became sure that he would make a great mistake if he should despise his countrified and seemingly thick-headed opponent, as 'Bijah played a game, both as to the manipulation of the cards and his general style of using them, that any professional gambler must have admired.

He could put the cards in the pack where he wanted them, and draw them out as he wanted them, almost as successfully as Fred Henning himself when he was obliged to resort to such methods; but not quite, and on that margin of superior skill Fred relied for safety.

So the game fluctuated, now one man ahead, and then the other, but neither at any time in danger of getting "froze out."

Moreover, the contest was longer and more tedious than it had been expected to be, promising to continue for an indefinite length of time.

Flush Fred perceived that he must use his best endeavors to beat the countryman, and he watched the chances closely.

When his opportunity came, he did not hesitate, in gambler's parlance to "play the game for all it was worth."

Abijah Stacey had the deal, and he shuffled the cards carefully and with a rare degree of skill; but Flush Fred, who was noting the operation narrowly, had about as good an idea as the dealer had of the position of certain cards in the pack.

"It is all in the cut," he thought, as the pack was laid down.

Then he cut the cards with great exactness, just where he wanted to, but at the same time so quickly that his careful work could scarcely be noticed.

Yet 'Bijah glanced up at the young man quickly, with a puzzled and displeased look in his wrinkled face.

Clearly the cut did not please him, and that was no wonder, as the cards had been so disarranged as to give his adversary those which he intended for himself.

As it would never do to let them go in that shape, he dealt so clumsily that the deal passed.

Flush Fred then proceeded to shuffle the deck, which he "stacked" in the most approved and effective manner; but he did this work so quickly and deftly and gracefully, that even his keen-eyed antagonist could not distinguish it from an ordinary innocent shuffle.

Abijah Stacey, indeed, was so completely deceived, that he cut the cards just where Fred wished them to be cut, and then the young man from the river had a death grip on the game.

This was of course, very wrong; but it was neither unusual nor unfair.

There is no such thing as a square game of poker, the scanty exceptions merely proving the rule.

The most reputable players will cheat if they can, and gambler's games are necessarily played with "advantage," to whatever extent may be required to win.

Fred Henning was only doing what Abijah Stacey had done and attempted to do, but was a little more skillful than his antagonist.

The latter got a hand that made him wink.

From the deal he received two aces and two queens, and in the draw he caught another ace.

Then he was willing to bet to the limit of his money on the table.

Flush Fred encouraged the other by drawing two cards, and he went cautiously into the betting, but finally concluded to risk the limit, and then he "called."

Abijah Stacey showed three aces and two queens, and Fred Henning laid down four kings.

This moment of victory was the real crisis of the game, when a row was to be expected, if ever.

As Flush Fred laid down his cards with his left hand, his right hand stole around to his pistol pocket, and he watched his antagonist keenly.

Jim Maybie and Ben Stanniford could be relied on to watch Colonel Jeff Stacey and his comrade, and they did watch them closely.

But there was no row, nor was there anything to indicate that a row had been contemplated by the other side in the event of their defeat.

Colonel Jeff and his companion made no move, and Abijah Stacey, quietly pushing the

money toward his adversary, got up with a sigh.

"You're too much for me," he said. "I allowed that I knew all about poker; but you know a heap more'n I do. You must be a world beater at that game."

"You give up, then?" inquired Fred.

"Hain't got nothin' left to give up. Reckon I know when I'm whipped."

"Was it a fair game, gentlemen?" demanded the winner, appealing to 'Bijah's friends.

"It was all right as far as I could see," answered Colonel Jeff. "'Bijah was beat, and the thing is settled, and thar's nothin' more we've got to do here. Our folks will draw out and go off, and your crowd can go ahead and have your own way, and we won't bother you any more."

Colonel Jeff stalked solemnly out of the cabin, followed by 'Bijah and the other Staceyite.

This result was almost too good to be true, but was apparently unquestionable, and the three men who were left congratulated each other warmly.

Ben Stanniford was in ecstasies over this unexpectedly easy settlement of the affair, and Jim Maybie was also jubilant, though he would have preferred a fight.

They hastened back to their friends to give them the joyful news, but had hardly reached them when they saw the Stacey party mount and ride away up the road.

"Who would ever have thought that Bram'll Stacey would give in so easy as that?" muttered Jim Maybie.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE WINNERS BEATEN.

THOUGH the dispute had been, as Ben Stanniford said, settled so unexpectedly and easily, there could be no doubt of the result, which could only be attributed to such a weakening on the part of Judge Stacey as nobody could have looked for.

It was certain that the Staceys had cleared out, and there was then nothing left to do but to ride on to the Allstrup house, rescue Eva Bramwell from her imprisonment, and take her to friends who would be glad to see her and care for her.

They had no order from Judge Stacey that would cause her to be peacefully delivered to them; but they were sure that their force would be sufficient to overawe anybody who might have been left to guard her.

So Flush Fred and his friends mounted, and rode merrily up the lane, Ben Stanniford in the lead.

When they reached the house, they found everything quiet there, and nobody about, not even a yellow dog; but that merely argued desertion on the part of Judge Stacey's adherents.

The leaders dismounted, and knocked at the door.

After pounding there a little while, and getting no answer, they broke open the door and entered the house.

It was empty.

The furniture remained, and there were some signs of hasty departure; but there was no human life left in the building.

After a thorough search, the men who had entered the house came out, disappointed, dejected, disgusted, and sadly reported to their comrades what they had found or failed to find.

"So they were playin' a game, arter all," observed Jim Maybie.

"And now it is easy to see what the game was," assented Ben Stanniford. "They were merely trying to occupy our attention and keep us from interfering with them, while they sneaked some men around and stole the prize that we were aiming at. Is not that so, Fred?"

Fred Henning could not do justice to the subject.

"It is the meanest, dirtiest, and most damnable game that white men could be guilty of," said he. "If I ever again come across any of the scoundrels who were mixed up in it, they will have to settle with me on the spot and right away. I feel just now as if I would like to sweep every Stacey from off the face of the earth."

The game had been played pretty much as the victims guessed it, with the exception of a special performance that was intended to favorably impress the unfortunate Eva.

Bramwell Stacey, when he was surprised by meeting a strong force of his enemies, had formed his plan with remarkable quickness and extraordinary acuteness.

Though he had been a conspicuous failure in the ordinary business of life, he was an adept in underhand work, priding himself upon his ability to do mean acts without being caught at them.

The sight of Abijah Stacey inspired him with an idea, and he went to work on it immediately, with the valuable aid of Colonel Jeff.

It was not supposed that Abijah, though undeniably a first-class poker-player, would win against such an expert as Flush Fred Henning; yet there was a chance that he might win, and the chance was worth taking.

Anyhow, he might be expected to stretch out

the game, and make such a delay as would give his friends time to carry out their secret purpose.

Tom Stacey had an important part to play in that scheme, and he was quietly sent away, with a few others, as soon as the game was determined on.

Though he was known to be unreliable because of his aptness to get drunk when he ought to be sober, and nobody was more fully aware of that failure of his than his father, he had not been able to get hold of any whisky since he left Staceyville, and it was presumed that he could be depended on for such an easy affair, especially when it so nearly concerned his personal interests.

Tom was to play the part of a hero, and this was a new character for him to assume; but he took it the more readily because his heroism was to be essentially fraudulent.

He was to reach the Allstrup house by a roundabout route as speedily as possible, and was there to rescue Eva from the villains who had captured her and held her as a prisoner, thereby earning her gratitude and establishing a claim upon her affection.

At the same time he would get her out of the reach of Ben Stanniford and his friends, and surely the attainment of that object would be a neat game to play.

It may be said for Tom Stacey that he played this game to the best of his ability, and that his success was not to be sneezed at.

As soon as he and his comrades were out of sight and hearing of the force that faced the Staceys, they put their horses to a gallop, and rushed them for all they were worth, over the ridges and through the ravines of the Staghead Hills, until they reached the Allstrup house, pretty well played out by their rough and rapid ride.

A brief conference with the men on guard there, and a few words of instruction to them, settled the manner in which the rest of the scheme was to be worked.

Then the racket began, and it was a racket that was calculated to inspire poor Eva with hope, if it should not frighten her out of her senses.

If there was a fight at the house, and there surely was a fight there, it must be that her friends had come to rescue her from her captors.

There was every evidence, indeed, of a close and deadly combat at the front of the house.

There were plenty of shouts and cries, mingled with pistol-shots which could not be heard down at the mouth of the lane, but which sounded very warlike right there.

When Tom Stacey and his comrades had achieved an easy and signal victory over the men who guarded the house, he requested one of them to tie a handkerchief around his left arm to give him the appearance of having been wounded in the affray.

Having ascertained the location of Eva's room he rushed up there, calling her eagerly as he reached the door.

The poor girl, who had been hoping and praying for the success of the supposed friends who had come to rescue her, did not recognize the voice as that of the man she had hoped to meet; but she opened the door instantly, and there she saw—Tom Stacey!

This was not by any means what she had expected, and she was at first astonished and cast down.

Tom did not allow her look of evident amazement, if he noticed it, to interfere with his plans in the least.

He hastened to repeat the speech which he had been instructed to make, and which he had carefully rehearsed for the occasion.

"My dear Eva!" he exclaimed. "Have I found you at last? This is indeed a joyful meeting!"

"Is it you then, Cousin Tom?" she mildly remarked, having quickly regained her self-possession.

"Yes, Eva, it is me. Who else should it be? It is me, and I have rescued you from the villains who carried you off and kept you here."

"Indeed! Who were the villains?"

"I—I—don't know yet. My dear Eva, how you must have suffered. My heart has been broken about you."

"Poor fellow! Is it broken yet? Perhaps some whisky might help you. Let me see if there is any here."

This brought Tom's speech to a pause at once, as he stopped and looked anxiously to see if Eva would find the whisky which she seemed to be seeking.

"There is none," she said, as she shook her head sadly. "Major Stacey must have drank all there was. I am so sorry, Cousin Tom, that there is no whisky."

"Never mind the whisky," he exclaimed, getting back to his heroic role. "I don't care about whisky. I am glad that I have found you and rescued you, and that is all I care about."

"But I am afraid that you are very dry."

"I can stand it. Let me tell you what I have done. As soon as I learned that you were missing, I got some friends together, and started out

to hunt you. But it was hard to get on your trail, and it was only by chance that I at last got a notion of where you were."

"Who told you that I was missing?" she inquired. "Was it your father?"

"Everybody knew it, and everybody was talking about it; but nobody knew what had become of you."

"Could not your father tell you?"

"My father? What should he know about it?"

"He was there when I was taken away, and I thought he was acquainted with the men. Major Stacey told me that Uncle Bramwell knew all about it."

These interruptions discouraged Tom, as well as put him out; but he had not finished his speech, and he hastened to get back to it.

"Major Stacey be blowed! Don't you know that he is out of his head? They ought not to have let him speak to you."

"That's so, Tom. Uncle Bramwell should have managed matters better."

"Will you listen to me, Eva? As soon as I found out where you were, I came on here to rescue you from the villains. We had a hard fight with them, and I am afraid it must have frightened you; but we whipped them out, though I was wounded, as you see."

"What a pity! Shall I not attend to your wound, Cousin Tom? I am not a bit afraid of the sight of blood. It seems to have been badly bandaged—over your coat-sleeve, too."

"Never mind that, Eva dear. I would gladly lose my arm for your sake. The wound don't bother me a bit."

This was one truthful statement, for which Tom should have due credit.

"Let me look at it," she implored.

"There is no time to spare. Those villains may have friends about here, and there is danger if we remain. Come, Eva!"

"I suppose I must go with you," she simply answered.

CHAPTER XXXV.

A WOMAN IN THE WAY.

It must have seemed to Tom Stacey, and it doubtless did, that his attempt to pass himself off as a hero was not making as favorable an impression on Eva Bramwell as he had hoped it would.

That young lady had treated the affair very coolly, interrupting his carefully-prepared speech with remarks which showed that she suspected the fraud of the entire performance.

She had even hinted that his alleged wound was a sham, and it was, indeed, a careless piece of business to tie the handkerchief over his coat-sleeve.

Thus his eloquence had failed to be effective, and he felt sheepish, like a man who has been caught in an obvious and unnecessary lie.

However, he had Eva in his possession, and she would be kept out of the reach of Ben Stanniford and his friend, and Tom's father could be depended on to bring her to terms.

That young lady looked about her quite coolly and calmly when she emerged from the house, and she saw no evidence of a bloody and desperate combat.

One of the men who had brought her there she saw standing near the corner of the house, apparently unconcerned, and surely not injured.

This naturally increased her suspicions, and brought out another of her sarcastic innuendoes. "Where do you bury your dead, Cousin Tom?" she inquired.

"Bury my dead? What do you mean by that?"

"The men you killed in that terrible fight awhile ago—what has become of them?"

"Oh, we didn't kill any of them, I am glad to say. It was a hard struggle, but we whipped them, and made them give in."

"They are very good, I am sure, to take their defeat so easily, and not try to get away."

Tom Stacey was then in a greater hurry than ever to start, as his cousin must be got out of the way of those suspicious surroundings.

The horse which she had ridden from her uncle's place, with the side-saddle she had then used, was brought forward, and Tom assisted her to mount.

"Take care of your arm," she thoughtfully remarked. "I am afraid that your wound is worse than you are willing to admit."

"Oh, I don't care about that. It was for your sake that I got hurt."

"What a brave fellow you must be! But I do not wonder at it, as I have heard that you have often been shot in the neck."

This was too bad; it amounted to downright impertinence; and Tom inwardly vowed that he would get even with that saucy and independent girl.

He hurried his party away, and rode off with Eva, followed by his comrades who had come with him from the road.

As soon as he was out of sight, the men who had been guarding the horses, and who were supposed to have been so badly defeated, came forward and made hasty preparations for their own departure.

After Major Stacey's outbreak, which had

excited the surprise and consternation of his medical relative, he was tied down to a husk mattress, which compelled him to keep quiet and submit to treatment.

He was brought down-stairs on the mattress, which was fastened upon the back of a horse, and he was informed that he was to be taken to his Cousin Bramwell's, where he could be properly cared for.

Mrs. Allstrup locked up the house, leaving it deserted, and carried away the key.

Then she and the three men mounted and rode away with the major, in a different direction from that taken by Tom's party, so that if pursuit should be attempted, there would be at least two trails to perplex the pursuers.

Tom Stacey and his party went off toward the north, taking a course which led them directly away from the road where their enemies were located.

It was a rough and hilly route, too, as well as an untraveled one, where it would be difficult to follow a trail, and when they reached a brook, they walked their horses in the water for a considerable distance.

Eva noticed these points, and her suspicions increased, while she at the same time rightly judged that pursuit was apprehended.

"Do you think any of those villains will try to follow us, Cousin Tom?" she inquired.

"They might—or their friends—but you needn't be afraid of them while I am here."

"I am not afraid. They did me no harm. But it is so strange. I had supposed that those men were Uncle Bramwell's friends."

"How could you get such a notion into your head?"

"It seemed queer to me at the time that two of them were needed to manage poor little me, while one was enough to manage such a big man as Uncle Bramwell. Then Major Stacey told me that they were Uncle Bramwell's friends, and so did somebody else."

"Who else?"

"I do not know who it was—somebody who came to the house. Is your arm easier, Cousin Tom?"

"It is easy enough now."

"I thought so, as you manage your horse well with your left hand. I see that the bandage is out of place."

So it was. The handkerchief had slipped down, and there was no sign of a bullet wound where it had been.

"If you will take off your coat, I will try to bandage the wound for you," Eva suggested.

"Oh, never mind it. It don't bother me."

"Where are we going to, Cousin Tom?"

"We are going where you will be safe and out of the reach of all sorts of villains, and you don't need to talk about it or ask any more questions."

"So I must hold my tongue. Those villains, as you call them, who carried me off never asked me to hold my tongue. I am afraid that your arm is worrying you, Tom, and that is what makes you so peevish."

After a little while the party got nearly out of the Staghead Hills, and halted on a treeless slope, from which there was a good view in all directions except that by which they had come.

"What are we stopping here for?" demanded Eva, in spite of the fact that she had been ordered to ask no more questions.

"We are waiting for somebody," gruffly answered Tom, who had expected to find the "somebody" waiting there for him.

"I hope we shall not have to wait long, as the day will soon come to an end, and I am getting hungry."

Pretty soon some more horsemen came in sight, and Tom and his party rode forward to join them.

They proved to be Judge Stacey, Colonel Jeff, and a few of their friends.

"So you are all right, Tom," remarked the judge.

"Everything straight as a shingle, sir. I was afraid that I would be a heap behind time, but was ahead of you at that."

"We had to go a long way around. How did you get hurt?"

Tom took his father aside, and whispered to him.

"I reckon it ain't worth while to work that racket any more, pap. She don't take to it a bit, and she suspects a heap."

"Let her suspect, and be blowed! I'm not going to hear any more foolishness about this business. Come on, Tom—you and Jeff. The rest may go home."

"Where are we going to?" Eva inquired again, and was pretty roughly told that she need not trouble herself to ask any more questions.

She rode on as she was ordered, with her uncle on one side, and her cousin on the other, and they soon came into a road with which they were familiar.

Eva had begun to grow despondent in view of the more than suspicious events of the afternoon, when she saw two women on horseback approaching their party, and she thought that she recognized their figures.

In this she was not mistaken, as they were

soon encountered, and proved to be Betty Marks and Martha Gibbs.

Miss Marks greeted Eva joyfully, greatly to the displeasure of Judge Stacey and his son Tom.

"Why, Eva Bramwell, I am so glad to see you! What has happened to you? I heard that you had been carried off by some scoundrels, and then I was told that you were at the Staghead Hills. You must tell me all about it, now."

"There is the woman I met in Staceyville, pap," whispered Tom—"the one who looks so much like our cousin from Kentucky."

Judge Stacey opened his eyes wide as he stared at Martha Gibbs.

He persisted in riding on with Eva; but Betty Marks and Martha Gibbs turned their horses and accompanied them.

"It is a long story," answered Eva, "and I cannot tell it to you now."

"We will meet again, I hope, when we can talk freely. You must be safe now, as you are with your uncle and your cousin. Are you taking her home, Judge Stacey?"

"I may be, and I may not," grunted that gentleman.

"Really, that sounds very mysterious, and I see that you are not headed toward your house. If you are not taking her home, may I ask where you are taking her to?"

"You may ask, but I do not intend to answer. That is my business, Miss Marks, and no business of yours at all. I have good reason to believe that you are not a friend to my family, and you have with you a—a person who, as I believe, lately played a shameful trick on me at my house."

"What! Martha Gibbs? She never plays tricks. If you do not object, I will ride on with you and talk to Eva."

"But I do object. I won't have it. I give you fair warning that if you don't keep away from me you will get into trouble."

"That is plain enough speaking. As you are able to enforce your orders, I had better obey. But I will see you again, Eva, dear."

The two women dropped back, leaving Judge Stacey's party to ride on by themselves.

"What do you suppose that means, Betty?" inquired Miss Gibbs.

"I don't know, but am going to find out. Some mischief, of course."

"I believe they mean to take her away. This road leads direct to the landing."

"That is true. I shall follow them."

"Alone, and at night?"

"Yes. There is nothing for me to be afraid of. Give me all the money you have about you, Martha. There is enough for you to do, too. You must go at once and find Mr. Henning and Mr. Stanniford, and tell them about this. Then you must go home and take care of the house for me."

"Where will you go to, Betty?"

"I will go where Eva Bramwell goes."

CHAPTER XXXVI.

QUICK AND SHARP WORK.

FLUSH FRED and his friends quickly came to the conclusion that there was no use in crying over spilt milk, and that they must do the best they could with the situation into which they had been thrust.

Not doubting that Eva Bramwell had been carried away from that house, forcibly or otherwise, while they were being swindled by the pretense of playing a game of poker for her possession, they sought to ascertain in what direction she had been taken, and therefore looked for a trail.

There were some good woodsmen in the party, and their sharp eyes speedily found two fresh trails.

Half the force was sent to follow one of these, under the command of Jim Maybie, while Fred Henning and Ben Stanniford, with the rest of the men, took the other.

It happened that the trail taken by the latter detachment was that which had been made by Tom Stacey and his comrades.

They followed it as rapidly as possible, considering its difficulty, but not near rapidly enough to satisfy their impatient souls.

Before long they missed it entirely, and were not able to recover it again.

The growing darkness, too, admonished them that any further efforts in that line would be useless, and they were glad to get out of the tangle of hills without losing themselves.

When they finally reached a road, a brief consultation was held, and Henning and Stanniford decided that, as they had not the faintest idea in what direction to look for Eva Bramwell, they could do nothing more then, but had better go on to Staceyville, get some rest, and renew the search in the morning.

It was believed to be probable that the young lady had been taken back to her uncle's house.

If so, nothing was to be gained by seeking her there, and she must be supposed to be comparatively safe.

So the friends who had accompanied the two young men thus far were dismissed to their homes, and Ben and Fred rode sadly on toward Staceyville.

They had little to say as they went, Ben brood-

ing mournfully and silently over his disappointed expectations, and his friend being so imbibed by the vile and successful trick which had been played on him, that he could scarcely trust himself to utter a word.

They could only hope that the party headed by Jim Maybie might have had better luck than they.

It was night and quite dark when they approached the village; but they saw ahead of them a man and a woman riding toward them.

The woman proved to be Martha Gibbs, and her escort was Charley Taintor.

She had gone to Staceyville, to continue an unsuccessful search, according to the directions of Betty Marks, for Mr. Henning and Mr. Stanniford, and the landlord had insisted on accompanying her when she decided to return home.

Flush Fred's spirits went up like a balloon when he caught sight of Miss Gibbs, and he greeted her warmly.

"We have lost the Queen of Hearts," said he, "but here is the Queen of Spades, and if we could find the Queen of Diamonds, I believe we could sweep the board and all be happy yet."

"I can tell you something about the Queen of Hearts as well as the Queen of Diamonds," replied Martha Gibbs. "I have just been to Staceyville, under orders from Miss Marks, to look for you two, and it is a great blessing that I have met you."

She gave a brief, but at the same time a full account of the meeting with Eva and companions, and of the subsequent action of Miss Marks.

"We both believed," said she, "that they had gone to the river to take a boat, as the road they were following led away from Judge Stacey's, and directly toward the landing. Betty said that she would go wherever Eva Bramwell went, and you may depend upon it that she will."

"May Heaven bless her!" exclaimed Ben Stanniford. "It is a glorious thing to know, whatever may happen, that my dear girl has one good and true friend near her."

"The Queen of Diamonds is a cart-load of jewels in herself," declared Flush Fred, "and I would bet my last dollar that our queen full will beat the game yet. How long is it since you met them, Miss Gibbs?"

The school-teacher stated the time as well as she could estimate it.

"We may be able to catch them," said Fred. "They have a big start of us; but a steamboat don't pass every hour. See Miss Gibbs safe home, Charley, and God bless you both! Come on, Ben! We must ride for all we are worth."

In a few minutes they galloped into Staceyville, where they ordered fresh horses on the instant, picking up a bite to eat while the saddles were being changed.

Andrew Bates came hurrying to them as they mounted.

"What's up?" he wanted to know. "Where are you off to?"

Fred Henning told him in as few words as possible.

"Wish you luck!" said the capitalist. "I would be glad to go with you, but I am getting too old for that helter-skelter work. Don't you want some money?"

"No, I have enough for both. We will leave you here to hold the fort, and you must not let the Staceys get on top again."

Through the then peaceful village, and out into the quiet country, Fred Henning and Ben Stanniford galloped like mad, eager to reach the river before the persons they pursued could get away.

They rode, as Fred had said they must, "for all they were worth," but were too late.

It was near midnight when they reached the river, and there was no steamboat in sight, nor any person visible about the landing.

They sought the man who had charge of the little warehouse there, and with some trouble succeeded in arousing him.

It was a discouraging story that he told them.

Judge Stacey had come there that night, with his son and Colonel Jeff and a young lady, wanting a boat, and they did not seem to care whether it was an up or a down boat.

They were in luck, as the Starlight soon came in sight, bound up the river, and a swinging lantern brought her in to the landing.

Judge Stacey and his party went aboard, leaving their horses there to be sent home.

"Was there nobody else?" inquired Fred.

"Yes, there was a woman who rode up just in time to catch the boat."

"Who was she?"

"Can't say as I know her; but she left her horse here, to be sent to Miss Marks's, near Staceyville, and I reckon she was Miss Marks. They war jest goin' to pull in the gang-plank when she skipped down the bank and got aboard. It was mighty queer—them folks comin' here at night, and hurryin' off like that, without a bit of baggage. But I've heerd that thar's been strange goin's on about Staceyville, and mebbe that was part of 'em."

"How long since the Starlight left here?"

"Not more'n a bit ago," was the indefinite answer. "If 'twasn't so dark, you might see

her smoke up yonder. Do you want to ketch her?"

"Right bad."

"That'll be easy enough, I reckon. It's a good ten mile around the bend, and about three mile across, with a decent road. It ought to be easy to head her off, and you kin git a skiff at the woodyard up thar."

Fred Henning gave the man some money to pay him for his trouble, had the road pointed out to him, and he and Ben Stanniford were off again, galloping like mad to cross the bend.

When they got across, they blessed the kind Providence that had made the Mississippi so crooked.

They saw the lights of the Starlight in the river, and she was below them!

They hastened to the cabin at the woodyard, and roused up the owner.

"We want a skiff in a hurry," said Fred Henning. "We want to board that boat which is coming up."

"I kin bring her in here," answered the man as he rubbed his eyes.

"We don't want to get her that way. We want the skiff."

"Who are you? I don't know you. I can't let a skiff go to strangers who may never bring it back."

"It is likely that we may never bring it back, and so I am going to pay you its full value before we start. We don't know you, either; but you belong here, and we are going to leave these horses with you, to be sent to Charley Taintor, the hotel man at Staceyville. What do you value the skiff at?"

The man named a sum that was surely big enough, and Henning paid it without a murmur.

Then they hastened down the bank and got into the skiff, Flush Fred taking the oars and pulling out upon the dark and turbid river like a man who was accustomed to that kind of work.

It was then easy enough to catch the Starlight, which came steaming slowly around the bend against a strong current.

The skiff was pulled to her starboard quarter, just abaft the wheel, and was made fast there.

As the boiler-deck of the steamboat was nearly level with the water, the two friends only had to step aboard.

"You must stay here and watch the boat, Ben," said Henning. "I will go up and get Miss Bramwell and bring her down to you, as I fancy that I can manage that business better than you can."

"What am I to do then?" inquired the younger man.

"You are to take her ashore, and make your way up the river as well as you can until you find a shelter or a team. I will get off at Bolivar, and will be sure to find you unless you meet me there."

There was silence on the boat, the deck-hands asleep, and even the engineers and firemen drowsing at their posts, when Flush Fred set out to perform his mission.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE QUEEN OF DIAMONDS.

JUDGE STACEY'S escapade had been executed according to the information given by the man at the landing to Fred Henning and Ben Stanniford.

The party had not passed through Staceyville, as the road they were following led outside of the village, and they had no wish to enter it.

Eva Bramwell frequently asked her uncle and cousin where they were going to, but got only evasive answers or rude rebuffs.

Finally she settled down to the conviction that they did not mean to tell her, that she was helpless in their hands, and that she could do nothing but try to resign herself to her fate.

The chance meeting with Miss Marks and Miss Gibbs had inspired her with some hope, but what could either or both of them do to aid her? If it had been Ben Stanniford and his friend, she might have expected something.

Judge Stacey and Tom knew well what she believed or suspected concerning them; but she was in their power, and when they could get her beyond the reach of the obnoxious individuals who had been making trouble at Staceyville they fully expected her to submit to their will.

As they had no fear of pursuit, believing that their route and destination were known only to themselves, they were not in such a hurry as were two men who followed them later.

When they reached the river and Judge Stacey began eagerly to make inquiries concerning a boat, their purpose became plain to Eva.

The Starlight had just come in sight from below, and the man in charge of the landing, obeying the instructions of Judge Stacey, prepared to signal her.

"Are we going on that steamboat?" demanded the young lady.

"Yes," her uncle answered.

"What for? Where are we going to?"

"You are going where you will be safe and out of the way of trouble."

"Are you and Cousin Tom going, too?"

"Of course we are, to take care of you."

"But we have not a bit of baggage. How can

I go with nothing to wear but what I have on?"

"You can pick up something before long. Money can settle all those questions."

Eva burst into tears.

It was not so much the prospect of a deficient wardrobe that troubled her, as the fact that she was being taken away from the vicinity of Ben Stanniford and his friend, who had come to Staceyville expressly to be near her.

They could not follow her, as they would not be able to even guess whither she had gone.

The steamboat, after whistling in answer to the signal, thrust her nose in at the landing, and a plank was run out, and Judge Stacey and his companions filed down the bank and went aboard.

Just then Betty Marks rode up and dismounted hastily.

After a few words to the landing man, she ran down the bank and boarded the Starlight, which immediately backed out and went on up the river.

Miss Marks was in no hurry to register as a passenger.

Indeed, she did not enter the cabin until Judge Stacey had finished that operation for himself and his friends, and had gone aft toward the ladies' cabin.

Then she entered her name at the clerk's office, and paid her fare to Memphis, as she believed that the Staceys would go as far as that city.

As Judge Stacey and his male companions had not lately had what they might call a square meal, and therefore possessed keen appetites, they hastened to make up for lost time in the victualing line.

By tipping a waiter and a cook, they got a good cold lunch served up to them in the middle of the cabin, and the bar supplied them with drinkables that suited them.

They invited Eva to join them; but she declared that she could not eat a morsel, and they left her to sulk in the ladies' cabin.

Of course there was no need that they should keep a watch over her, as she was safe, and could not get off the boat except by jumping into the river, an act of desperation of which they did not consider her capable.

While they were fortifying their inner men, the enemy was stealing a march on them.

Betty Marks, who had been watching their proceedings closely, slipped around on the guard, entered the ladies' cabin near the stern of the boat, and presented herself before the disconsolate Eva.

That young lady was surprised and overjoyed at seeing her, and eagerly inquired how she had got there and where she was going to.

Betty briefly explained how she had got there, and declared that she was going wherever Eva went, and that she meant to stick to her through thick and thin, in spite of everything and everybody.

"That is not all," she added. "Martha and I guessed that you had been taken to the river, and I left her behind to hunt up Mr. Henning and Mr. Stanniford and put them on the track. You may be sure that they will find a way to follow us, and catch up with us somehow."

"You are really a friend in need," cried Eva. "How good you are to me! What have I done to deserve such a sacrifice from you?"

"It is no sacrifice, my dear. It is nothing but fun to me, and if I am not sharp enough to get ahead of those relatives of yours, I am mistaken in myself. You know that I am fond of you, and Mr. Stanniford, who loves you, is a particular friend of Mr. Henning's."

"Whom you love!" suggested Eva.

"To speak the honest truth, my dear, I have never loved, and shall never love, any man but Fred Henning; though he does not care for me, except as a friend. But we have no time for this kind of talk, Eva. Your uncle will be coming back here directly, and he will put a stop to it."

"Perhaps you had better get out of the way before he comes, and he may not know that you are on the boat."

"What would be the use? He is bound to see me before long, and I may as well have it over with. I want to astonish him, you know."

Betty Marks had her wish.

When they had finished their luncheon, Colonel Jeff and Tom gravitated to the bar to get something to smoke, and Judge Stacey, after cautioning his son to leave liquor alone, went back to the ladies' cabin to look after Eva.

When he saw her seated on a sofa, in familiar and earnest conversation with a lady, it occurred to him that she had struck up a very sudden friendship.

When that lady looked up and faced him, and he recognized Betty Marks, he was so astonished that he was ready to drop to the floor, and was quite unable to express his emotions.

Was it possible that this was the same woman from whom he had parted so rudely in the neighborhood of Staceyville?

How and when had she got on that boat, and what was she there for?

These were questions which he would have been glad to ask her; but his dignity, combined with his wrath, would not allow him to do so.

Though he got control of his speech, he could not begin to do justice to the subject.

"You here?" he exclaimed. "Is this really you, madam—Miss Marks?"

"I believe it is, if I know myself," she coolly answered.

"What are you doing here? What are you here for?"

"Surely I have as good a right to be on this boat as you have, Mr. Stacey. I have paid my fare."

"You must not be talking to my niece. Eva, I wish—I positively command—that you shall hold no communication whatever with this—this—Miss Marks!"

"You will hardly be able to turn me out of the ladies' cabin," observed Betty.

"I can at least control my niece, who is also my ward. Eva, go into your state-room instantly! I insist upon it!"

As Eva turned to obey this order, Betty gave her a look that strengthened her hope and confidence.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

EXIT EVA.

JUDGE STACEY, unable to stay and watch Betty Marks, and counting on Eva's obedience, hastened to acquaint his companions with this most unaccountable and shocking discovery.

They were quite as much astonished as he was, and it was mutually agreed among the Staceys there present that this danger must be watched and guarded against.

"She is one of the smartest critters you ever struck," remarked Colonel Jeff. "The fact is, I reckon, that she follored us to the river from beyond Staceyville, and sneaked into the boat just after we had gone aboard. That must have been the way of it, as there couldn't be any other way."

Eva had gone into her state-room, and Miss Marks was supposed to have followed her example; but it was necessary that they should both be watched during the remainder of the night, and who would watch them?

All three of the Staceys, having been subjected to loss of sleep and continued exertion during the greater part of two days and a night, were almost painfully in need of rest.

Judge Stacey, who was the oldest, considered himself the worst off; but Jeff, whose system had been subjected to a very severe strain, had a similar opinion concerning himself, and both men were sure that they were not capable of any further endurance without an allowance of rest.

Tom Stacey, who was young and strong, proposed that he should take upon himself the burden of watching, and, as he had been remarkably temperate during nearly twenty-four hours his proposition was accepted.

After Judge Stacey had firmly impressed it upon his son that he must not touch any liquor before morning, and had obtained from him a solemn promise that he would not go near the bar, the anxious father and Colonel Jeff retired to their respective state-rooms.

If the old man had been a little less stringent, and had not made so strong a point of it that Tom was to drink nothing at all, it is possible that the young man might have been more moderate in his potations.

The feeling that he was absolutely shut off from liquor gave him a consuming thirst for it, and the first thing he did when he found himself free was to soak his skin in whisky.

He kept his promise in one respect, by not going near the bar, but sent there for a bottle of liquor, with which he proceeded to atone for his enforced temperance.

He planted himself on a sofa near the ladies' cabin, where he sucked and sucked at his bottle, until he became utterly oblivious of all subsequent happenings.

If he had been wide-awake and watchful, he might not have been of any use, as the curtains which shut off the sacred precincts of the ladies' cabin at night were drawn, and its occupants could go out and come in without being noticed by him.

When Fred Henning left Ben Stanniford in charge of the boat below, he hastened to execute a scheme which he had fully formed.

Ascending to the cabin to reconnoiter, he found Tom Stacey snoring on the sofa, and could easily guess why he was there.

As for judging what was the matter with him, no guesswork was needed for that.

After a search, Fred discovered a chambermaid, whom he bribed to go aft and call up Miss Marks, giving her his name, and requesting her to meet him as soon as possible on one of the upper guards.

Betty Marks, who had neither undressed nor gone to sleep, was vastly pleased as well as surprised by the receipt of this message, and she hurried to the appointed place to meet the man who had sent it.

Fred Henning was also not a little surprised at the greeting she gave him, as she seized him, pulled his head down, and gave him an eloquent kiss.

"You dear, blessed fellow!" she exclaimed. "How did you ever get here?"

Fred easily explained how he had overtaken and boarded the steamboat.

"You are very smart," she said.

"Not a bit smarter than you are. It is a great blessing that you are here, and we must attend to business. Go and wake up Miss Bramwell, and tell her that Ben Stanniford is below with a skiff, ready to take her ashore if she will go with him, and she ought to go."

"Indeed she ought, and I believe that she will, since matters have come to this pass. Stay right here, Fred, and I will go and speak to her."

Betty easily aroused her young friend, and told her the great news of the arrival of the young men and of their intentions.

Eva was not sure at first whether it was good news or not, as she was fairly frightened by the proposal that was made to her.

"How can I leave my guardian?" she wanted to know.

"Just by stepping into the skiff and going ashore," answered Betty. "From such a guardian as he you have a good right to get away, as he is trying to use you to advance his own interests, without the least regard to your happiness or welfare."

"But to go off at night and alone, even with Ben, would not that be a terrible thing?"

"Nothing terrible about it. He loves you, and you love him, and you have promised to marry him whenever you can. Well, you can marry him as soon as you are willing to. Mr. Henning and I will see to that. This is your last chance, Eva—your only chance. If you miss it, your uncle will get you out of our reach, and will then force you to marry his son Tom, who is out there in the cabin now, as drunk as a hog—that is, if a hog was hoggish enough to get drunk."

"I will go," answered Eva.

"It is the best move you ever made. Hurry up and get ready."

"I have no getting ready to do. I am wearing all my things."

"That is so, and I am in the same fix. Come on, then."

On the guard they found Fred Henning, who was rejoiced at Eva's determination, and assured her that she would never repent it.

"You now know what your uncle means," said he. "From what he has done you can judge what he will do, and you may be sure that you are not safe with him."

"I believe you, Mr. Henning," answered Eva, "and yet I must admit that I am afraid."

"There is nothing to be afraid of—not near as much as there is here. Ben will take you safely to the shore, where he will find shelter and a team to take you on to Bolivar, where Miss Marks and I will join you."

"Can't you go with me, Betty?"

"No, dear. I am pretty heavy, you know, and I am afraid that the skiff is not big enough for three of us. You will be safer alone. Besides, I shall be wild to see the fun when you are missed."

Flush Fred conducted the young lady silently and secretly to the lower deck, carefully keeping her out of sight of anybody who might be watching or lounging about, and gave her in care of Ben Stanniford.

At the sight of her lover all her fears and misgivings vanished, and she seated herself bravely in the stern of the skiff.

After a parting instruction to his friend, Fred Henning cast off the line.

The skiff dropped down the river with the current until it was at a considerable distance from the steamboat, and then Ben Stanniford took the oars and rowed toward the dark but not distant eastern shore.

Flush Fred returned to the cabin-deck, where Betty Marks had watched the skiff until it was out of sight.

"That was a good piece of work," he said. "It has cut what might be called, if I remember rightly, the Gordian Knot."

"And it could not have been cut more neatly or at a better time. Now, Fred, you must go and lie down and get some rest, as I am sure you need it badly."

"So do you, and you must take your own advice. But one of us must square the chambermaid."

"I will attend to that, and she must wake me early, as I can't afford to miss a bit of the fun. Good-night!"

Flush Fred went back to the clerk's office, where he registered and paid his fare to Bolivar.

Then he went to his state-room for a snooze of two or three hours, leaving an order to be called early in the morning, as he also felt that he could not afford to miss a bit of the fun.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

AN EXPLOSION OF WRATH.

THE "fun" that Fred Henning and Betty Marks were looking for came a little sooner, perhaps, than they expected it.

Tom Stacey awoke before daylight, feeling the need of a nip, as he had drained his bottle.

He made his way to the bar, found it closed, and staggered back to the sofa, where he vainly tried to get some more sleep.

He was, of course, on hand as soon as the bar was opened, when he filled himself up, and then he had found it easy enough to drop into a doze.

Judge Stacey and Colonel Jeff were also awake at an early hour, though Tom was decidedly ahead of them, and each thought it advisable to put himself outside of an "eye-opener" before beginning the serious duties of the day.

So they sallied forth from their state-rooms and sought the bar, the judge reaching that haven just as the colonel was about to absorb his matutinal cock-tail.

They "joined" each other, and then felt so much better, after their risk and their draw, that their prospects appeared much brighter than of late.

"If that confounded Marks woman hadn't happened to get aboard of this boat, we would be all right," remarked Judge Stacey. "But she is bound to make trouble if she can, and I don't know how we are going to get clear of her."

"We can drop out from under her," replied Jeff. "We must arrange matters so as to slip off at some landing to-night while she is asleep."

"I reckon we can manage that. Now let us go and see how Tom is getting on."

"He has given up and gone to sleep," said Colonel Jeff when they spied the delinquent on the sofa in a comatose condition.

If it had been nothing but sleep that had conquered him, they might better have endured that disappointment; but it was something much worse than sleep—he was decidedly and disreputably drunk.

His father shook him severely, and Tom sat up, rubbed his eyes, and stared at them stupidly.

"Reckon I must have dropped asleep," said he. "It was tiresome, sitting up here all night."

"Asleep!" roared his angry parent. "Is that all that is the matter with you? You are drunk, and nearly dead drunk at that. Have you been that way all night?"

"Hain't been drunk at all," sullenly answered Tom. "I went to the bar and got a nip a bit ago, and I reckon that is what made me sleepy."

"A nip? You must have been nipping it like an elephant, to get into that condition. What is that bottle doing here?"

Judge Stacey picked up Tom's empty bottle, and smelt of it.

"Have you really gone and sucked out all the liquor there was in that bottle? Of course you have. Oh, you are a sweet one to trust anything to. Jeff, I believe he has been stupid drunk ever since we left him here."

"Perhaps he hasn't missed anything," put in the colonel.

"He must have missed something. For all we know, that Marks woman may have got hold of Eva and carried her off."

"I don't believe we have made any landing. Let us go and see."

Inquiry at the clerk's office developed the fact that no landing had been made by the Starlight since the two Staceys came aboard, and consequently nobody could have left the boat.

This assurance made Judge Stacey feel much easier, and he could not doubt that Eva was safe in his possession; but he was destined to experience a terrible disappointment.

After waiting a while to give the young lady time to finish her sleep and get up, and perceiving that she did not come out, her uncle grew impatient, and sent a chambermaid—not the one who had been employed by Flush Fred—to her state-room to arouse her.

After knocking without getting any answer, the chambermaid tried the door, and it opened easily, but there was no person in the state-room, though it had evidently been occupied.

Judge Stacey, somewhat surprised, but not as yet really troubled, caused a search to be made through the boat of all places where the young lady might possibly be; but such places were few, and the report was brought to him that she was nowhere to be found.

It was no wonder that he then flew into a passion, and stormed about at such a rate that he aroused the passengers in that part of the boat who still happened to be asleep.

Among those who came out to see what was the matter was Betty Marks, who was glad that she was thus enabled to get an early glimpse of the "fun."

Upon her Judge Stacey opened the battery of his wrath immediately.

"So you are here!" he shouted. "This is some of your work. I knew that you meant mischief as soon as I saw you on the boat. You have been working a mean and secret scheme to get my niece away from me."

"What do you mean, Mr. Stacey?" demanded the lady with dignity. "Have you taken leave of your senses? What is the meaning of this unseemly disturbance?"

"Where is my niece?" roared the judge.

"I am not Miss Bramwell's keeper. I sup-

posed that you held that office. Where should she be, if not in her room?"

"She is not there, I tell you, and she can't be found anywhere on the boat."

"Perhaps she has stepped ashore at some landing."

"The boat has not made a landing since she came aboard."

Betty Mark's countenance assumed an expression of utter woe.

"Is it possible?" she exclaimed. "Has the poor child been driven to destroy herself? Has she jumped into the river and made an end of herself? I was afraid that her troubles were greater than she could bear."

"That is nonsense," grunted Judge Stacey. "As if she would want to die and leave all her money. She had no troubles."

He secretly doubted whether some such disaster might not have occurred; but he had fixed it in his mind that Miss Marks was responsible for Eva's disappearance.

"This is your doing," he vociferated, "and I want to know what you have done with my niece, and where she is."

"I don't know what I could have done with her," mildly answered Betty, "unless I swam ashore with her, and that seems to be impossible."

"You have got her hid somewhere on this steamboat. Oh, I will get even with you, I will settle with you for this."

Judge Stacey's loud talk had attracted to the spot a number of the passengers, who looked at him as if they thought he should have better manners than to berate a woman so roughly.

"Perhaps you had better go a little easy," was remarked in a quiet but firm and peremptory tone at his shoulder.

Looking around quickly, he saw Fred Henning, and a new anger struggled for utterance.

"You here, too? How in the name of wonder did you get on this boat? But, that's no matter. I see it all now. This is an infamous conspiracy, and you are at the bottom of it."

"You may accuse me of what you please," replied Fred; "but I want to tell you right now that if you address any more harsh language to that lady, you will have a personal difficulty with me, and I would advise you to avoid it. What is the matter, Miss Marks?"

"Eva Bramwell was on this boat last night," answered Betty, "and her uncle there says she has disappeared. I am afraid that the poor child has destroyed herself to end her troubles. That man was accusing me of having hid her from him; but it is more likely he has made way with her. He was speaking about her money just now, and if she is dead, her fortune is his. Who else would want to put her out of the way?"

"What! I?" stammered Judge Stacey, to whom this accusation was a hit from the shoulder. "Why, I can prove—"

"Never mind what you can prove," interrupted Flush Fred. "If suspicion rests on anybody in this matter, it rests on you; but, let us have no more charges or countercharges, in view of what appears to be a great calamity."

This solemn speech reduced Judge Stacey to silence, and Colonel Jeff had nothing to say.

"Before you fly off the handle again," continued Flush Fred, "you had better ascertain for a certainty whether Miss Bramwell is anywhere on the boat. If she is not, the conclusion must be that she has destroyed herself or has been destroyed."

CHAPTER XL.

ANOTHER EXPLOSION.

THE bystanders were so clearly of Fred Henning's opinion, and were so ready to side with Betty Marks, that Judge Stacey perceived he had better follow the advice, though it came from an enemy.

"I will go and make sure of that fact," said he. "If my niece has disappeared, I will find out who is responsible for her disappearance."

This big talk did not count for much, as the judge and the colonel made a rather undignified exit from the ladies' cabin.

By this time the people on the boat were thoroughly aroused and alarmed, the mysterious disappearance of a young lady stirring up a great excitement.

The officers and a portion of the crew started a search, in which the passengers readily joined, and every part of the boat was carefully examined, but without discovering the missing girl.

Inquiries that were freely made were also fruitless, as Eva's exit had been so quietly and secretly conducted that no person but those immediately concerned in it knew anything about it.

The night chambermaid, who might have given some interesting information, had been well paid to keep silence, and was, besides, off duty then and sound asleep.

As there could be no doubt that Eva Bramwell had disappeared, it was the general conviction that she had committed suicide, though there were some who had noted Betty Marks's statement concerning the young lady's fortune and her uncle's heirship, and were strongly inclined to suspect him of having made way with her.

Bolivar was in sight by the time the search was concluded, and Fred Henning and Betty Marks prepared to go ashore, though they had very little preparation to make.

"Suppose the Staceys should get off there, too," suggested Miss Marks.

"It would not surprise me a bit," answered Fred. "If they should, we must find Miss Bramwell as soon as possible, and keep her out of their sight."

The idea of getting off at Bolivar had not only occurred to the judge and the colonel, but had become a settled conclusion.

They easily perceived that some of the passengers looked at them askance, and that the suspicion that was directed toward them might make their further stay on the Starlight unpleasant.

"There is one consolation that may come out of this," remarked the judge to the colonel when they were out of hearing of any others.

"Do you mean what Miss Marks hinted at?" inquired Jeff.

"Just that, though not precisely in the way she meant it. If that girl has really gone and killed herself, it is very sad; but I suppose it is a fact that her property will come to me."

"As it is settled that she is not on the boat," said the colonel, "we have nothing to gain by staying here any longer, and possibly something to lose."

"That is so, and we will get off at the next landing, which I believe is Bolivar. Let us go and get a good drink at the bar before we go ashore."

The judge and the colonel walked up to the bar and call for what they wanted.

As they raised their glasses to their lips, there was a trembling of the floor beneath them, then a sharp concussion, then a terrific roar, and then confusion and chaos.

The boilers of the Starlight had exploded, and a more destructive disaster had seldom occurred on the Mississippi.

Fortunately there were but few passengers on the boat, or the explosion would have ranked with the most terrible in the annals of the Western rivers.

How the Starlight happened to be carrying such a heavy head of steam was an enigma to many, and the engineer on duty, who was instantly killed, could not be expected to solve it.

It was known that her boilers were old, and perhaps the barkeeper, if he had survived the explosion, might have supplied some information concerning the engineer.

The one fact concerning which there could be no controversy was that the Starlight was suddenly and completely destroyed; the greater part of the boat being blown to fragments by the explosion, and the remainder easily falling a prey to fire and flood.

Not only was it a good thing that the passenger-list was small, but it was fortunate that the disaster occurred in the daytime and within sight of a town.

Boats put out from the shore immediately, and the survivors who were able to swim or to support themselves on fragments of wreckage, were speedily picked up.

The Starlight, however, soon became a steamboat of the past, as her remains sunk in deep water.

Fred Henning and Betty Marks had started toward the forward end of the cabin, when they were suddenly and violently separated, never again to see each other alive.

In the upheaval and rending and crashing and tumbling in of everything below and above and about them, they were as helpless as straws in a tornado, and did not even know what had happened to them.

When Flush Fred came to his senses, he found himself in the water, a little bruised, but otherwise uninjured, and able to swim for his life.

He was compelled to use all his strength and skill to keep clear of the struggling people about him and the masses of wreck that were driven and whirled by the strong current.

Finally he got hold of a fragment of the hurricane deck, which supported him until he was picked up by a skiff.

As the skiff moved toward the shore, he caught sight of the body of a woman in the water, swirling rapidly down-stream, and he reached out and seized it by the hair of the head.

When the face came into view, he recognized Betty Marks.

She was quite dead, and a deep wound in the forehead showed that her death had been sudden and painless.

The body could not be taken into the skiff, which was fully loaded, but was towed to the shore, and was carried to a place where it could be suitably prepared for burial.

Flush Fred's worldly wealth was all on his person, and consequently safe.

It consisted mostly of bills, which needed to be carefully dried before they could be used; but he had specie enough for the purchase of some dry clothing, which was his chief necessity just then.

As he sallied forth, after arraying himself in his dry garments, he was astonished at meeting Tom Stacey.

Scarcely any person on the Starlight had been more helpless and less deserving to live than that young man; yet he had been saved, while many abler and better people had perished.

Though they had been a considerable distance apart at the time of the explosion, he found himself, when he reached the water, within a few feet of Colonel Jeff, who was uninjured thus far, and who went to his assistance.

As the colonel was a good swimmer, and Tom was as yet too stupid to struggle, he was kept up until his rescuer could get hold of a piece of wreckage that was large enough to support them both.

The colonel found it a rather difficult job to get his helpless relative mounted safely on the float; but he finally succeeded, and was about to draw himself up there, when a heavy timber from the ruined boat struck him on the head, and that was the last of Colonel Jeff Stacey.

Tom held on, and was picked up by a boat from the shore.

He was sober when Fred Henning met him, though somewhat dazed, and was about to start a search for his father and Colonel Jeff.

Judge Stacey's body was recovered, but the river never gave up the mortal remains of the colonel.

CHAPTER XLI.

EVA BRAMWELL'S LUCK.

BEN STANNIFORD was by no means as good an oarsman as Fred Henning, who seemed to excel at everything he undertook; but he could row a skiff, and he pulled in stoutly toward the shore, "quartering" across the current, so as not to be carried too far down stream.

Eva Bramwell was so agitated by mingled emotions—joy at escaping from persecution, doubt of the propriety of leaving her uncle and guardian, pleasure in the presence of her lover, and trepidation at finding herself alone with him at night—that she could scarcely trust herself to speak, and Ben was too busily occupied with his rowing to allow himself to talk.

Though the night was dark, her sight was keen, and she soon espied something which, under the circumstances, she was glad to believe she saw.

"I think I see a house over there near the bank," she said.

"I hope you do, Eva dear," cheerily answered Ben, "as that is just what we want to find. The current is so strong here that I can't turn around to take a look at it; but you can tell me how to head the skiff, and we will reach the house, if it is a house."

"Pull a little more up-stream, then."

Ben headed the skiff as the fair pilot directed him to, and shortly landed it at the bank, where he helped her out, and made the boat fast to the root of a tree.

It was a little difficult to get Eva up the steep and sandy bank; but that feat was soon accomplished, and they found themselves near a clearing which proved to be a cultivated field.

Across the field was the house which Eva had described, and thither they hastened as fast as the darkness and the obstacles would allow.

"We are in great luck," said Ben. "Indeed, we have had the best of luck in every way to-night, and have good reason to be thankful."

"I am glad you think so," answered Eva; "but I am afraid."

"What are you afraid of, my dear?"

"I am afraid that I have been doing a wrong thing in running away from my uncle, and that there may be more trouble."

"The one thing necessary was to get away from him, so that you might avoid trouble, and you surely had a right to escape from his persecutions."

"What will come of it, Ben?"

"Why, we will be married, and then you can defy him."

"But he is my guardian, and perhaps I cannot be married without his consent."

"If his consent were necessary, he would not have been so anxious to get you out of my way. No, Eva, you are of age, as far as marriage is concerned, and are entitled to choose for yourself. Why, here we are, already!"

They had reached the building, and found it, to their great delight, to be a respectable farmhouse, and evidently inhabited.

As they crossed the road which lay between the field and the house, their approach started up a couple of dogs, which barked vociferously, but were restrained by a picket fence from running out at them.

The barking of the dogs, and Ben Stanniford's loud hail, aroused the inmates of the house, and finally a man opened the door and demanded who was there and what was wanted.

He was soon satisfied that they meant no harm, and, though he did not understand how or why they had come there, he quieted the dogs, and invited them to enter.

The planter, who afterward gave his name as Stephen Beemer, lighted up a front room, and scrutinized his guests, who were apparently young people of respectability and good position.

Of course, nobody could look at Eva and suspect that she had been or intended to be guilty

of any wrong-doing; but that only made their arrival on foot and at that hour seem the more strange.

Mr. Beemer was presently joined by his wife and son, who also joined in the scrutiny and questioning.

Ben Stanniford was clearly of the opinion that his best course under the circumstances would be to tell the story plainly and fully.

He began by saying that the young lady under his protection was Miss Eva Bramwell, who had run away from her uncle, Bramwell Stacey, to escape from persecutions which had become unendurable.

Stephen Beemer's face lighted up at once.

"If you mean Bramwell Stacey of Staceyville," said he, "the man they call Judge Stacey, I know him to be a rascal, and I reckon the young lady is not to blame. He owes me three hundred dollars, and I've never been able to get a cent of my money, and there's lots more he owes, too. What beats me is, that I can't guess how you happened to get here at this time o' night."

"We came from a steamboat in the river," answered Ben, "and I have tied up a skiff at the bank, which I will leave for you. A friend of mine bought it at a wood-yard this side of the big bend."

"That is mighty queer. Tell me all about it, young man."

Thus encouraged, Ben went on and told the entire story of Eva's troubles and the difficulties about Staceyville, down to the episode of the Starlight and the skiff escapade.

"What we want now," he said in conclusion, "is to get a team to take us right on to Bolivar, so that we may join our friends who are to meet us there, and we hope you will let us pay you for your trouble."

"We won't take any pay," replied Stephen Beemer. "We are glad to get the chance to help you. But it will be much better for you to wait till morning. The road is none too easy to travel at night, and you both ought to have some rest."

"It don't lack very much of morning now," remarked Ben, "and we are anxious to reach our friends as soon as possible, as they will be uneasy about us until they see us."

Upon this point Ben Stanniford insisted, and Eva, who was quite as anxious to get on as he was, also entreated that a conveyance should be furnished them, and Stephen Beemer finally yielded.

"I will drive you up there myself," said he, "as you will need a safe hand with the team, but will take George along. I shouldn't wonder a bit if that uncle of yours gets off at Bolivar, too. It won't be worth while for him to stay on the boat after he has missed you, and George and I may be useful to keep you out of trouble."

Mrs. Beemer provided some refreshments for her guests while the horses were being put to the wagon, and soon they were driving over the road as rapidly as the darkness would allow.

Their progress was slow, however, until daylight, and the morning was well advanced when they neared their destination.

A mile or so from the town they met a man riding at full speed, whom Stephen Beemer recognized and hailed, asking whither he was going at such a rate.

"After Dr. Burr," he answered.

"Ain't there doctors enough in town?"

"Not for this."

"What's the matter?"

"A steamboat blowed up, and lots of people killed and hurt."

"What steamboat?"

"The Starlight."

This was a terrible blow to Ben and Eva.

They could not help thinking how fortunate it was that she had been taken off the boat before the disaster occurred; yet their friends had been involved in the calamity, as well as their foes, and they were nervously anxious to learn who were lost and who were saved.

Ben eagerly asked the messenger if he knew the names of any of the people who had been killed or hurt.

"No, and I can't stop to talk," he answered as he galloped on.

CHAPTER XLII.

FLUSH FRED'S LUCK.

STEPHEN BEEMER appreciated the anxiety of his passengers, and hurried them into Bolivar at the best speed his horse could make.

There was great excitement in the little town, and all the people were talking about the disaster or trying to make themselves useful; but Fred Henning had been looking out for his friends, and was with them before the carriage halted.

A few words told his story.

Tom was the only one of the Staceys left alive, and Betty Marks was dead.

There was no reason why Eva Bramwell should grieve for her uncle; but she forgot his selfishness and his persecutions for the moment, and thought only of his sudden death.

For Betty Marks she mourned deeply and with good cause.

A wealthy woman, apparently with every-

thing that could make life pleasant and desirable, she had devoted herself to the service of her friend, and in so doing had lost her life.

Flush Fred, after ordering that the horses should be cared for, brought the four into the hotel, where there was a breakfast for such as could eat, and the events since Eva left the Starlight were duly related.

The young lady was congratulated on her good fortune in escaping the disaster, and Stephen Beemer was praised until he was compelled to disclaim any merit for having merely sheltered the strays and provided them with a conveyance.

Henning would not allow his friends to see the body of Betty Marks until it had been properly cared for and placed in the best coffin that could be procured, with the terrible wound in the forehead concealed.

Then he, hardened man of the world as he was, broke down and cried like a child, mingling his tears with those which Eva shed so abundantly.

"She was a fine woman," he said, "as good as gold and as true as steel. I wish—I wish—but it is too late to wish."

At Eva's request he and Ben Stanniford performed a like service for the body of Judge Stacey, as Tom, though passably sober then, was so badly dazed and broken up as to be incapable of caring for his father's remains.

Having attended to all they had to do in Bolivar, and having overwhelmed Stephen Beemer and his son with thanks for their kindness, Fred Henning and his friends waited for a boat bound down the river, and took the first that landed—a mournful party of three men, one woman, and two coffins.

Tom Stacey was something of a care to them, and he seemed to have lost control of himself; but even he was brought home safely and in as good order as could be expected.

As soon as possible he was turned over to the care of Dr. Randolph Stacey, who also took charge of his deceased relative.

From the Staceyville landing a messenger was sent on a fleet horse to inform Martha Gibbs of what had happened, and to prepare her to receive her dead friend.

At Staceyville the party met Andrew Bates, who went on with them to the late home of Betty Marks.

He was also much depressed by the tragical ending of the difficulties in which he had taken part; but the bitterest grief was that of Martha Gibbs, who mourned her friend as one who could not be comforted.

"No one knew her as I did," she said. "Nobody else knew how lovely she was, and how worthy to be loved. You might have known it, Mr. Henning, as I may say now that you were the only man she ever loved; but I suppose you never cared for her in that way. Before long you will know something about her love for you."

It was not until Betty Marks had been buried in her own grounds that Flush Fred understood the meaning of that statement.

Then he learned that Martha had been made the custodian of her friend's will, and that Betty had left him her Staceyville property with the sum of ten thousand dollars in money.

"So you are in big luck at last, Fred," remarked Ben Stanniford.

"The worst of luck, my boy. If I could have her back, that would be worth while; but I lost her just when I had learned to love her. I don't want this house and land, and I mean to give it to you when you marry."

Ben would not take it on those terms; but, after his marriage with Eva Bramwell, which soon took place, he consented to occupy it and take care of it for his friend.

Andrew Bates had something to say about that.

He foreclosed his mortgage on Judge Stacey's homestead, collected his debts in the neighborhood, and paid Fred Henning a fair price for the late home of Betty Marks, which he presented to Stanniford, as nothing would induce Eva to live at the house which her uncle had occupied.

As for the overbearing power of the Staceys, that had become a thing of the past.

After the death of the judge and the colonel, and the mental and physical break-up of the major, the remainder of the family were content to "simmer down" and make no pretensions to the control of the country, or even of the village of Staceyville.

The difficulties in and about the village, though attended by tragical circumstances that called for legal investigation, were never noticed by the authorities, the fighting being regarded as a neighborhood quarrel which had been settled and need not again be stirred up.

Ben Stanniford and his wife did all they could to care for Tom Stacey; but his was a hopeless case; whisky soon claimed its victim, and he perished miserably.

Flush Fred drifted away as formerly, but with the feeling that he had a home to come to whenever he wearied of wandering, and it may be said of him that he placed his legacy where it would be out of the reach of faro banks.

Andrew Bates offered to procure for Charley

Taintor a good hotel business in Memphis; but, since it was settled that his independence was not to be crushed out by the Staceys, Charley preferred to stay where he was and go on in the old way.

Jake Tolliver, the vagabond, was taken away from the neighborhood by Flush Fred, and was given a chance to make something of himself, and in the course of a few years he flung on style in a way that astonished Staceyville when that town got a chance to look at it.

THE END.

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